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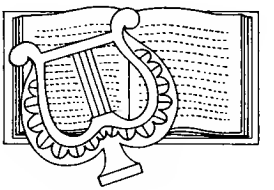

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A WITCH OF THE HILLS

A WITCH OF THE HILLS

A NOVEL.

BY

FLORENCE WARDEN,

AUTHOR OF

"THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH," "A WILFUL WARD,"
"A WOMAN'S FACE," "AT THE WORLD'S MERCY," ETC.

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A WITCH OF THE HILLS

A WITCH OF THE HILLS.

CHAPTER I.

POOR little witch! I think she left all her spells and love-philters behind her, when she let herself be carried off from Ballater to Bayswater, a spot where no sorcery more poetical or more interesting than modern Spiritualism finds a congenial home. What was her star about not to teach her that human hearts can beat as passionately up among the quiet hills and the dark fir-forests as down amid the rattle and the roar of the town? Well, well; it is only in the grave that we make no mistakes; and life and love, God knows, are mysteries beyond the ken of a chuckle-headed country gentleman, with just sense enough to handle a gun and land a salmon.

And the sum and substance of all this is that the Deeside hills are very bleak in December, that the north wind sighs and sobs, whistles and howls among the ragged firs and the bending larches in a manner fearsome and eerie to a lonely man at his silent fire-side, and that books are but sorry substitutes for human companions when the deer are safe in their winter retreat in the forests, and the grouse-moors are white with snow. So here's for another pine-log on the fire, and a glance back at the fourteen years which

have slipped away since I shut the gates of the world behind me.

The world! The old leaven is still there then, that after fourteen years of voluntary—almost voluntary—exile, I still call that narrow circle of a few hundreds of not particularly wise, not particularly interesting people—the world! They were wise enough and interesting enough for me at three and twenty, though, when by the death of my elder brother I leapt at once from an irksome struggle, with expensive tastes, on a stingy allowance of three hundred a year, to the full enjoyment of an income of eight thousand.

How fully I appreciated the delights of that sudden change from "ineligible" to "eligible!" How quickly I began to feel that, in accepting an invitation, instead of receiving a favour I now conferred one! My new knowledge speedily transformed a harmless and rather obliging young man into an insufferable puppy; but the puppy was welcomed where the obliging young man had hardly been tolerated. Beautifully gradual the change was, both in me and in my friends; for we were all well bred, and knew how to charge the old formulas with new meaning. "You will be sure to come, won't you?" from a hostess to me, was no longer a crumb of kindness, it was an entreaty. "You are very kind," from me, expressed now not gratitude, but condescension. A rather nice girl, who had been scolded for dancing with me too often, was now, like the little children sent out in the streets to beg, praised or blamed by her mother according to the degree of attention I had paid her. I did not share the contempt of the other men of my own age for this manœuvring

mamma and the rest of her kind, though I daresay I spoke of them in the same tone as they did. In the first place, I was flattered by their homage to my new position, interested as it was; and in the second, in their presence we were all so much alike, in dress, manner, and what by courtesy is called conversation, that the poor ladies might well be excused for judging our merits by the only tangible point of difference—our relative wealth.

In our tastes, our vices, real or assumed, there was equally little to choose between us. We knew little about art and less about literature. In politics we were dogged and illogical partisans of politicians, and cared nothing for principles. Religion we left to women, who shared with horses the chief place in our thoughts. Nature having fortunately denied to the latter animals the power of speech, there was no danger of the two classes of our favourites coming into active rivalry.

In the intoxication of early manhood, while the mind was still in the background to the senses, the surface of things provided entertainment enough for us. Characters and even characteristics were merged in a uniformity of folly without malice, and vice without depravity. If we gambled, we lost money which did no good while in our hands; if we gave light love, it was to ladies who asked for no more; if we drank, we only clouded intellects which were never employed in thought.

Looking back on that time from the serene eminence of nine-and-thirty, I can see that I was a fool, but also that I got my money's worth for my folly, which is more than I can say for all my later aberrations of intellect. And if, on the brink of

forty, I find I can give a less logical account of my actions and feelings than I could at the opening of life, it is appalling to think what a consummate ass I may be if I live another twenty years! I begin to wish I had set myself some less humiliating task, to fill my lonely hours by a mountain winter fireside, than this tracing the process by which the idiot of five-and-twenty became the lunatic of five-and-thirty Well, it's too late to go back, now that I have called up the old ghosts and felt again the terrible fascination of the touch of the now gaunt fingers. So here's for a dash at my work with the best grace I can.

I had been enjoying my accession to fortune for about eighteen months, during which I had devoted what mind and soul I possessed wholly to the work of catering for the gratification of my senses, when I fell for the first time seriously in love, as the natural sequence of having exhausted the novelty of coarser excitements.

Lady Helen Normanton was the third daughter of the Marquis of Castleford, a beauty in her first season, who had made a sensation on her presentation, and had attracted the avowed admiration of no less a person than the Earl of Saxmundham, such a great catch, with his rumoured revenues of eighty or ninety thousand a year, that for a comparative pauper with a small and already encumbered estate like mine to dare to appear in the lists against him seemed the height of conceit or the depth of idiotcy. But Lady Helen's eyes were bright enough, and her smile sweet enough, to turn any man's head. They caused me to form the first set purpose of my life, and I dashed into my wooing with a headlong earnestness that soon made my passion the talk of my friends. I had one

advantage on my side upon which I must confess that I largely relied; I was good-looking enough to have earned the sobriquet of "Handsome Harry," and I was quite as much alive to my personal attractions, quite as anxious to show them to the best advantage, as any female professional beauty. It was agony to think that, having already exhausted my imagination in the invention of devices by which, in the restricted area of man's costume, I should always appear a little better dressed than any one else, I could do nothing more for my love than I had done for my vanity. As a last resource I curled my hair.

The boldness of my devotion soon began to tell. The Earl of Saxmundham was fifty-two, had a snub nose, and was already bald. Lady Helen was very young, sweet and simple, and perhaps scarcely realised yet what much handsomer horses and gowns and diamonds are to be got with eighty thousand a year than with eight. So she smiled at me and danced with me, and said nothing at all in the sweetest way when I poured out my passion in the supper-rooms and conservatories, and giggled with the most adorable childlikeness when I kissed her little hand, still young enough to be rather red, and told her that she had inspired me with the wish to be great for her sake. And the end of it was that the Earl began to retreat, and that I was snubbed, and that these snubs, being to me an earnest of victory, I became ten times more openly, outrageously daring than before, and my suit being vigorously upheld by one of her brothers, who had become an oracle in the family on the simple basis of being difficult to please, I was at last most reluctantly accepted as Lady Helen's betrothed lover.

My success gave me the sort of prestige of curiosity which passionate earnestness, in this age when we associate passion with seedy Bohemians and earnestness with Methodist preachers, can easily excite among a generation of men who, having no stimulating iron bars or stone walls between them and their lady-loves, can reserve the best of their energies for other and more exciting pursuits. I was the respectable Paris to a proper and perfectly well-conducted Helen, the Romeo to a new Juliet. My wooing and engagement became a society topic, the subject of many interesting fictions. Spreading to circles a little more remote, in the absence of any Downing Street blunder or Clapham tragedy, the story became more romantic still. I myself overheard on the Underground Railway the exciting narration of how I forced my way at night into the Marquis's bedroom, after having concealed myself for some hours behind a Japanese screen in the library; how, revolver in hand, I had forced the unwilling parent to accede to my demand for his daughter's hand, and much more of the same kind, listened to with incredulity, but still with interest.

It was hard that, after the *éclat* of such a beginning, our engagement should have continued on commonplace lines, but so it did. My love for this fair girl, being the first deep emotion of a life which had begun to pall upon me by its frivolity, had struck far down and moved to life within me the best feelings of a man's nature. I began to be ashamed of myself, to feel that I was a futile coxcomb, only saved from being ridiculous by being one of a crowd of others like me. I gave up betting, that I might have more money to spend on presents for her; less legitimate

pleasures I renounced as a matter of course, with shame that the arms which were to protect my darling should have been so profaned; vanity having made me a "masher," love made me a man. Unluckily, Helen was too young and too innocent to appreciate the difference; her eyes still glowed at the sight of French bonbons, she liked compliments better than conversation, and burst into tears when one evening, as she was dressed for a ball, I broke, in kissing her the heads of some lilies of the valley she was wearing. The little petulant push she gave me opened my eyes to the fact that no sooner had I discovered myself to be a fool in one way than I had straightway fallen into as great an error in another direction. It dawned upon me for the first time, as I sat opposite to Helen and her mother in the barouche on our way to the ball, what a horrible likeness there was, seen in this half-light of the carriage lamps, between Helen with her sweet blue eyes and features so delicately lovely that they made one think of Queen Titania, with an uncomfortable thought of one's self as the ass, and the placid Marchioness, whose features at other times one never noticed, so utterly insignificant a nonentity was she by reason of the vacuous stolidity which was carried by her to the point of absolute distinction. Would Helen be like that at forty? Worse still, was Helen like that now? It was a horrible thought, which subsequent experience unhappily did not tend to dispel. My first serious love had worked too great a revolution in me, had made me conscious of needs unfelt before, so that I now found that mere innocence in the woman who was to be the goddess of my life was not enough; I must have capacity for thought for passion.

All this I had taken for granted at first, while the struggle to win her occupied all my energies; but when from the mad aspirant I became the proud betrothed, I had leisure to find out that the beautiful, dreamy, far-away eyes of my *fiancée* in no way denoted a poetic temperament, that her romance consisted merely in the preference for a handsome face to an ugly one, and in the inability to understand that she, an Earl's daughter and a spoilt child, could by any possibility fail to obtain anything to which she had taken a fancy. I was surprised at the rapidity with which I, a man seriously and deeply in love, came to these conclusions about the girl who had inspired my passion. I could even, looking into the future, foretell the kind of life we should lead together as man and wife, when she, fallen from the ideal position of inspiring goddess to that of a tame pet rabbit, bored to death by my solemnity when I was serious, and frightened by my impetuosity when I was gay, would discover, with quick woman's instinct, that the best of myself was no longer given to her, and cavilling at the neglect of a husband whose society oppressed her, would find compensation for her wrongs among more frivolous companions. So that, weary of frivolity myself, my wife would avenge my defection.

I suppose almost every man, in the sober hours which alternate with the paroxysms of the wildest passions, can form a tolerably correct forecast of his life with the woman who likes to believe that she has cast him into an infatuation whose force is blinding. The picture is always with him, showing now in bright colours, now in dark; varying a little in its outlines from time to time, but remaining substantially the

same, and more or less accurate according to the measure of his intellect and experience; not at all the picture of even an earthly paradise, but yet with charms which satisfy human longings, and make it hard to part with. So I, having made up my mind that beauty, gentleness and modesty, good birth and fairly good temper were the only attributes of my future wife on which I could rely, philosophically decided that they formed as good an equipment as I had any right to expect, doubled my offerings of flowers and bonbons, and transferred the disquisitions on art, literature, religion and politics, in which I had begun to indulge, to her brother.

Lord Edgar Normanton was a tall, fair, broad-shouldered young man, who, while joining in all the frivolous amusements of his age and station, did so in a grave, leisurely, and reflective manner, which caused him to be looked up to as one capable of higher things, whose presence at a cricket match was a condescension, and who appeared at balls with some occult purpose connected with the study of human nature. I had always looked upon his special friendship for me as an honour, of which I felt that my new departure, in deciding that I had sown wild oats enough, made me more worthy. It never occurred to me to ask myself or anybody else whether his wild oats were sown. It was enough for me that he was glad when mine were. With the loyalty of most young men to their ideals of their own sex, I would far rather have discovered a new and unsuspected flaw in Helen's character than have learnt anything to shake my respect for her brother. Women, when not considered as angels, can only be looked upon as fascinating but inferior creatures, whose faults must be

overlooked as irremediable, in consideration of their contributions to the comfort or the pleasure of man. One may argue about them, but, except as a relaxation, one cannot argue with them.

Edgar was openly delighted at my engagement with his sister, which he considered merely in the light of a tie to bring us two men closer together. Such a little nonentity as I found he considered his sister to be might think herself lucky to be honoured by such a use.

This was the position of affairs when a memorable shooting party in Norfolk, of which both Edgar and I formed members, resulted in an accident which was to bring my love affair to an end as sensational as its beginning.

CHAPTER II.

WE were engaged upon that hospitable abomination at a shooting party—a champagne luncheon. Having made a very fair bag for my morning's work, and being tired with my exertions, I was inclined to think that the serious business of the day was over for me, and that I might take it easy as regarded further effort. Edgar, who, since his discovery that my fervour on the subject of his sister had grown less ardent, was inclined to assume more of the character of mentor towards me than I cared about, had seated himself on the ground beside me; but I had found an opportunity of changing seats, for I felt less well-disposed towards him that morning than I had ever been before. The fact was that the gentle Helen had snubbed me two evenings previously for a demonstration of affection which I had carefully prepared, lest she, too,

should have noticed the waning in my love. Upon this I had retreated, with a very odd mixture of feelings towards my *fiancée*, and there had been a reserve between us for the whole of the evening, which Edgar somewhat unwisely interfered to break. Looking upon myself as the injured person, I had resented the homily he felt himself called upon to administer, and though I made my peace with Helen next day, I avoided her brother. He made two or three good-natured overtures to me in the manner of an experienced nurse to a forward child, but on the morning of the shooting party I was still as far as ever from being reconciled to the paternal intervention of Edgar the Wise and the Good.

"The Ladies!" cried one of the party, leaning lazily back on his arm and raising his glass.

"Say 'Woman,'" I amended; "it's more comprehensive."

"Well, but 'The Ladies!' ought to be comprehensive enough for you just now, Maude," said some one, glancing mischievously at Edgar, whose solemnity was increasing, and scenting something warmer than controversy.

"Not now, nor ever!" said I, with more daring than good taste. "In 'Woman' we can secretly worship an ideal better than ourselves. In 'The Ladies' we must bow down to creatures lower than ourselves, whose beauty deceives us, whose frivolity degrades us, and whom nothing more sacred than our care and their own coldness protects from the fate of fellow-women whom before them we do not dare to name."

Everybody looked up in astonishment, and Edgar's red healthy face became purple with anger.

"A man who holds such opinions concerning ladies is probably better qualified to judge that other class which he has the singular taste to mention in the same sentence with them."

"Perhaps it is easier to find mercy for victims than for tyrants."

Edgar rose to his feet with the ponderous dignity of an offended giant.

"If I had known your opinions on this subject a little earlier, Mr. Maude, I should never have allowed you to form an alliance with my family."

I rose too, as hot as he; and secretly alarmed and repentant at the lengths to which my recklessness had carried me, I was not ready to submit to the didactic rough-riding of the man who had long ago himself instilled into me his own supreme contempt for the weaker sex.

"Perhaps I, Lord Edgar, should have thought the honour too dearly bought if I had known that it involved my acceptance of a self-appointed keeper of my conscience."

Our host, Sir Wilfrid Speke, now interfered to calm the passions which were rapidly getting the better of us, and thrusting my gun under my arm, he literally carried me off, and marching me to a covert on the slope of a hill where was a noted "warm corner," he told me good-humouredly to "let the birds have it," and left me to myself and them.

I was in a very bad temper. Enraged by the recollection of Helen's simpering coldness, by her brother's recently-assumed dictatorship, and by my own reckless want of self-control a few minutes before, I was not in the mood for sport. Was this to be the result of my determination to take life more seriously,

that I discovered my *fiancée* to be a fool, my most honoured friend a bore, and myself capable of undreamt-of depths of bad taste and ill temper? I would go back to my old life of languid chatter and irresponsible dissipation. I would content myself again with my fame as the "handsomest man in Town," would accept my future wife for what she was, and not for what she ought to be, give her the inane, half-hearted attentions which were so much more to her taste than earnestness and devotion, and see thought and Lord Edgar at the devil.

I felt much more inclined to shoot myself than to open fire on the pheasants, but headlong carelessness, and not tragic intention, caused the accident which ensued. In getting through a gap in a hedge, my gun was caught by a briar as I mounted to the higher ground on the other side; I tried to free it, and handling it incautiously, a sudden shock to my face and right shoulder told me that I had shot myself. I was blinded for the moment, and trying to raise my right arm I felt acute pain, and the next instant I felt the warm blood trickling down my neck.

I tried to walk, but I staggered about and could make no progress, so I leaned against a tree and shouted; but my head going dizzy, I soon found myself on the ground, filled with one wish—that I might live long enough for some one to find me, and receive the last instructions by which I could atone to pretty Helen for the vulgar earnestness of my love.

My next recollection is of a dull murmur of voices heard, as it seemed, in the distance, then of pain grown suddenly more acute as I was moved; all the time I could see nothing, and I had only just time to under-

stand that I was being carried along by friends whose voices I recognised, when I fell again into unconsciousness.

I recovered to find myself back at Sir Wilfrid's; a doctor was dressing my wounded head and examining my shoulder; there was a bandage across my eyes, and on trying to speak I found that the right side of my face was also bound up. I passed the night in some pain, and must have been for part of it light-headed, as I discovered two or three days later, when Edgar, much moved, told me that I had implored everybody who came near me to witness that I left all I possessed to Lady Helen Normanton, and had begged for the pen and paper I could not have used to execute my proposed will.

During the next few days Edgar hardly left my bedside. My head and eyes were still kept tightly bandaged, so that I could neither see nor speak, nor take solid food. Seeing me in this piteous condition, Edgar, like the good fellow he was, decided that sermons were out of season, and that I must be amused. His humour, however, being of a somewhat slow and cumbrous kind adapted to his size, I took advantage of my enforced silence to let him joke on unheeded, while my own thoughts wandered dreamily away to my life of the past few years, and to the odd, quickly discovered mistake in which it had lately culminated. I was surprised by the persistency with which Helen's placid silliness tormented me, fresh instances of it coming every hour into my mind until I began to ask myself whether the little blue-eyed lady had really been born into the world with a soul at all. And so, no longer suffering bodily pain, I lay day after day, very much absorbed by my own self-

questionings, and by strange dreams of a new Helen, who came to me with the fair face and soft eyes of the old, but with bright intelligence in her gaze, whispering with her delicate lips words of love and tenderness.

I woke up suddenly one night, still hot with my sleeping fancy that this revised edition of my *fiancée* had been with me. I had seemed to feel her breath upon my cheek, even to feel the touch of her lips upon my ear, as she told me my illness had taught her how much she loved me. I thought I was answering her in passionate words with a great thrill of joy at my heart, when I woke up and found myself as usual in darkness and silence.

"Edgar!" I called out; "Edgar!"

He answered sleepily from a little way off, "Yes. Do you want anything?"

"No, thank you."

A pause.

"I say," I went on a few moments later, "nobody has been in the room, have they?"

"No, no-o-body," with a yawn. "At least, I may have dozed, but I don't think——"

"No, of course not." But I was horribly wide awake by this time. Some of the bandages round my head having been removed for the first time the evening before, I had liberty of speech again, of which I resolved to make the most. "I say, Edgar, there's a fire flickering in the grate, isn't there?"

"Yes, why?"

"Well, if I can see that quite well, why on earth do they still keep the bandages over my eyes? I know they were afraid of my going blind. But I haven't; so what's it for?"

"I don't know," mumbled Edgar, rather blankly. He added hastily, "I suppose the doctor knows best; you'd better leave them alone."

"Oh, yes."

A long silence, during which Edgar, under the impression that it was part of a sick nurse's duty when the patient showed signs of restlessness, pottered about the room, and at last fell over something.

"I say, Edgar," I began again, "isn't my face a good deal battered about on the right side?"

I heard him stop, and there was a little clash of glasses. Then he spoke, with some constraint.

"Yes, a little. I daresay it will be some time before it gets all right. But you've no internal injuries or broken bones, and that's the great thing."

The last statement was made so effusively that it was not difficult for me to gather that my face was more deeply injured than he liked to admit.

"I know quite well," said I composedly, "that I shall have to swell the proud ranks of the plain after this; I must cultivate my intellect and my virtues, like the poor girls whom we don't dance with! I've lost a finger, too, haven't I? On my right hand?"

"Only two joints of it," answered Edgar with laboured cheerfulness.

"What would poor Helen say to me if she could see me now?" I suggested, rather diffidently.

"Say! Why, what every true woman would say, that she loved you ten times better now you were disfigured than she did when you were the counterpart of every other good-looking popinjay in town!"

This, uttered with much ponderous vehemence, was by no means reassuring to me. In the first place,

it confirmed the idea that my injuries would leave permanent marks. In the second place, it led me to ask myself whether, Helen's chief merit in my eyes having been good looks, my chief merit in her eyes might not have been the same.

As I said nothing, Edgar, now fully awake, came nearer to the bed, and said solemnly: "You do Helen injustice, Harry."

"And you taught me to do her injustice, Edgar."

At first he said nothing to this, and I knew that he understood me. But presently I felt his hand laid emphatically on my left shoulder, and he began in a low earnest voice: "Look here, old chap, that's not quite fair. I may have inveighed against the intellectual inferiority of women scores of times when you encouraged me by feeble protest. I may have spoken of my own sister as an example of the sweet and silly. When you saw her and became infatuated about her I listened to your rhapsodies in silence because I couldn't endorse your opinion that she was an angel. But I was glad you had taken a fancy to the child, and I knew that you might have done much worse. Well, my opinions have undergone no transformation. The women of the middle class, whom it is now the fashion to educate, the women of the lower class, who have to work, may be considered as reasoning creatures, varying, as men do, in their reasoning powers. But the women of the upper classes, *pur sang*, who are equally above education and labour, may be ranked all together, with the exception of those whom alliance with the class below has regenerated, as more or less fascinating idiots, whose minds are cramped by unnatural and ignorant prejudices, and in whom an occasional ray of intelli-

gence disperses itself in mere freaks of art, of philanthrophy, or of religion."

"Then, if you are logical, you may end by marrying a barmaid."

"I think not. Barmaids are young women who, by the exacting demands of their calling, are bound to be healthy, active, intelligent and shrewd. Consider how such a woman would be thrown away in the ridiculous and empty existence led by our wives! How she would laugh at the shallow interests of the women around her, and despise her do-nothing husband! Without counting that she might be demoralised by her new position, and add the mistakes of a parvenue to the foibles of the class into which she was admitted;"

"Then, on the whole, you will——"

"Remain single, or take for wife the usual fool of my own class, who will have the usual fool of her own class for a husband."

"But, Edgar," said I, after a short pause, "I am not so calm as you are, and my mind is less well-regulated than yours. I want something in my wife that you would not want from yours. The docile acceptance of my love would never content me; I want it returned."

But this view of the case had the effect of irritating Edgar, who naturally resented the idea of any other nature having deeper needs than his own.

"It is unreasonable to expect, from our physical and mental inferior, powers equal to our own," he said, in a tone of dismissal of the subject.

"Then how am I to expect from Helen the power of looking at my disfigured face without horror, when I am by no means sure that I could have felt

redoubled devotion if a similar accident had happened to her?"

"Women are different from us, and not to be judged by the same rules. Beauty—of some sort—is a duty with them, while every one knows that an ugly man makes quicker progress with them than a handsome one."

"Well, I should like to judge what sort of progress with them my ugliness is likely to make. Give me a looking-glass."

But he would not. He said the doctor had forbidden me to use my eyes yet, that my face was still unhealed, and the bandages must not be moved. And finally he declined to talk to me any longer, and told me to go to sleep.

I was not satisfied. I knew that I was getting well fast, that there was no need to keep me in bed, and I felt curious as to the reason of my still being kept so close a prisoner. So I found an opportunity when I had been left, as they thought, asleep, to remove the bandage from my eyes with my left hand. My sight seemed as good as ever, but the skin round about my right eye seemed to be tightly drawn. The window-blinds were down, and as evening was coming on there was only light enough to distinguish dimly the objects in the room by the help of the flickering flame of the fire. I got out of bed and walked to the toilet-table, but the looking-glass had been taken away; to the mantelpiece, with the same result. I grew impatient, angry, and rather anxious. There was a hand-glass in my dressing-bag, if I could only find that; I remembered that I had left it in the dressing-room. I dashed into the room, and as that, too, was darkened, I turned to draw up the blind.

By that movement I came face to face with a sight so appalling that, of all the misfortunes my accident has ever brought upon me, none, I think, has given me a shock for the first moment so horrible. I saw before me the figure of a man with the face of a devil.

The right eyebrow, the right side of the moustache were gone, and the hair as far as the back of the right ear. The whole of this side of the face, from forehead to chin, was a puckered drawn mass of blackened shrivelled skin, distorted into grotesque seams and furrows. The right end of the eye and the right corner of the mouth were drawn up, giving to the whole face a sinister and evil expression.

After a few moments' contemplation of my new self, I turned away from the glass, feeling sick with disgust and horror. In the first shock of my discovery, no reflection that I was looking upon the fearful sight at its worst, and that the healing work was still going on underneath the scarred and desiccated skin, came to console me.

My back turned upon my own image, my stupefaction gave place to rapid thought. I saw in a moment that the whole course of my life was at one blow broken up, that I must begin again as if I had been born that day. I must go away, not only from my own friends, but from the chance of coming in contact with them again. I must leave England. Also, since if I were to make my resolution known I should be inundated with kindly meant disuasions, I must breathe no hint of my intention until I was quite able to carry it into execution. I was sure that no one but the doctor, and perhaps Edgar, had seen my face in its present condition, and that no description could give to others any idea of it appearance. I felt that

my bodily health and strength were all that they had ever been, and that nothing but the wish to keep the knowledge of my disfigurement from me as long as possible had prompted the doctor's orders to me to remain in bed and to retain the bandages. It now, too, occurred to me that delay might bring some slight modification of my hideousness, and I resolved to let nature do what little she could, and not to set out on my travels until the mask which now covered one-half my face had fallen off, and disclosed whatever fresh horrors might be underneath. Then I would, without letting any one see my face, start for some German Spa for the benefit of my health; before I had been away three months I should be forgotten, and free to wend my way wherever I pleased. This idea, to a man to whom life had begun to present something like a deadlock, was not without charm. Society was a bore, love a delusion; now was the chance to find out what else there was worth learning in life.

I heard Edgar's voice in the distance, and had only time to rush back to bed, put on the bandages round my face, and turn on my side as if asleep, before he came into the room.

CHAPTER III.

As I heard Edgar creaking softly about the room, giving the impression, even as I lay with my eyes shut, unable to observe his elaborate movements, of great weight trying to be light, my heart smote me at the thought of deceiving him with the rest. "The elephant," it had been a joke beween ourselves for me to call him; and like a great elephant he was, huge,

intelligent, gentle, not without a certain massive beauty, with keen feelings of loyalty, and a long slow-smouldering memory, with inclinations towards a laborious and somewhat painful sportiveness. Rebel against his sententious homilies as I occasionally might, he was a good old fellow, and I was fond of him. I moved a little to show him I was awake, and then said:

"Hallo, Edgar, is that you?"

"Yes. How do you feel?"

"Oh, ever so much better. I shall be getting up soon now."

"Well, you mustn't be in too great a hurry. You have been patient so long, it would be a pity to destroy your credit just at the last."

"I am only waiting for my face to heal now, of course. But, I say, Edgar, it will take a long time for that to get all right. Why, part of my cheek was completely blown away. It will be months, at least, before I dare show myself. I think I shall go to some German baths, and, you know, I don't know how long I may have to stay there. In the meantime——"

"In the meantime, what?"

"Your sister—Helen—must know that she is free."

"But supposing she doesn't want to be free? Supposing——"

"Supposing she has a fancy for being tied to a death's-head? No, Edgar, she must be released at once. I want you to write a letter from me to her, if you will. The sooner it is over the better for both of us."

I suppose Edgar felt that my attitude was not one of pure resignation, for he made no further effort to

dissuade me, but went instantly in search of pens and paper. He was so very submissive, however, in taking this step, which I knew to be distasteful to him, that I was quite sure, before the letter was half written, that he was "up to" something. So, when it was finished, I was mean enough to insist on his leaving it with me, together with the directed envelope; and after reading it carefully through myself as soon as I was alone, I made the housekeeper fold it and seal it up in my presence, and directed her to get it posted at once.

The letter said

"MY DEAREST HELEN—You have no doubt long ago heard the reason of my silence, and forgiven me for it, I am sure. I am sorry to tell you that my head [I felt an odd shyness of saying 'my face'] has been injured so seriously that it will be a long time before I can return to town; I am going straight to Germany as soon as I am able to leave here, and cannot yet tell when I shall be in England again. Under these circumstances, although I know that you would overlook my new imperfections with the same sweetness with which you have forgiven my older defects, I feel that I cannot impose again upon your generosity. I therefore set you free, begging you to do me one last kindness by not returning to me the little souvenirs that you have from time to time been good enough to accept from me. And please don't send me back my letters, if you have ever received them with any pleasure. Burn them if you like. I will send back yours if you wish; but, as no woman will ever look with love upon my face again, your womanly dignity will suffer but little if you let me still keep them. There are only eight of them. And there is a glove,

of course, and a packet of dried flowers, of course, and the little silver match-box. All these I shall insist upon keeping, whether you like it or not. They could not compromise anybody; the little glove could pass for a child's. You will trust me with them all, will you not? You see this isn't the usual broken off match with its prelude of disastrous squabbles and wrangles. Some jealous demon who saw I did not deserve my good fortune has broken my hopes of happiness abruptly, and released you from a chain which I am afraid my ill-temper had already begun to make irksome to you. Forgive me now, and bear as kindly a recollection of me as you can. God bless you, Helen. I shall always treasure the remembrance of your little fairy face, and remember gratefully your sweet forbearance with me.

"Yours most sincerely and affectionately,

"HENRY LYTTLETON MAUDE."

I hoped the child would not think this letter too cold and formal. My heart yearned towards her now with a longing more tender than before; I felt oppressed by the necessity of foregoing the shallow little love which, as the handsomest man about town, I had begun to consider far beneath my deserts.

Two days later I received an answer from Helen. I waited until I was alone to read it, for I still guarded my face carefully from all eyes but the doctor's. The touch of the letter, the sight of the sprawling, slap-dash handwriting which it delighted Helen to assume, in common with the other young ladies of her generation, moved me; for I could not but feel that this was the last "*billet*" by any possibility to be called "*doux*" which I should ever

receive. I opened it with an apprehension that I should find the contents less moving than the envelope. I was mistaken.

"MY DEAREST HARRY—I am afraid you have a very poor opinion of me if you think I care for nothing but personal attractions. You have always been most kind and generous to me, and you need not think because I am not intellectual myself I do not care for a man who is intellectual and all those things. I am coming down to see you myself and then if you wish to give me up you can do so—but I hope you will not throw me over so hastily. I am so sorry for your accident and that it has made you so ill, but I do not mind what else it has done.—Believe me, dearest Harry, with best love, hoping you will soon be quite recovered, yours ever lovingly,

"HELEN."

Childish as the letter was it touched me deeply. Edgar must be right after all; I had misjudged a simple but loyal nature that only wanted an emergency to bring its nobler qualities to the surface. I told him about the letter, and added that it made giving her up harder to bear.

"Why should you give her up?" said he eagerly. "You see she herself will not hear of it."

"Because she does not understand the cause. I am disfigured past recognition; she would shrink with horror from the sight of me. It would be a shock even to you, a strong unromantic man, to see what I have become."

"You are too sensitive, old fellow. However shocking the change in you may be, you cannot fail to exaggerate its effect on others."

"We shall see."

A few days later, when the horror of my new appearance was indeed a little mitigated by the falling off of the withered outer skin which had covered the right side of my face, I tried the effect of my striking physiognomy on Edgar.

Whether he had expected some such surprise, or whether he was endowed with a splendid insensibility to ugliness, he stood the shock with the most stolid placidity.

"Well?" said I defiantly, looking at him from out my ill-matched eyes in a passion of aggressive rage.

"Well?" said he, as complacently as if I had been a turnip.

"I hope you admire this style of beauty," I hurled out savagely.

"I don't go quite so far as that, but it's really much better than I expected."

"You are easily pleased."

He went on quietly. "The chief impression your countenance gives one now is not, as you flatter yourself, of consummate ugliness, but—forgive me—of consummate villainy."

"What!"

"You are preserved for ever from the danger of being anything but strictly virtuous and straightforward in your dealings, for no one would trust the possessor of that countenance with either a secret or a sovereign."

This blunt frankness acted better than any softer measures could have done; it made me laugh. Looking again at myself in a glass, for I was now up and dressed, I noticed, what had escaped me before in my paralysed contemplation of the change in my

own features, that the drawing up of the right-hand corners of my mouth and eye, together with the removal of every vestige of hair from that side of the face, had given me the grotesquely repulsive leer of a satyr. To crown my disadvantages, the left side of my face, seen in profile, still retained its natural appearance to mock my new hideousness.

"But I think I see a way out of all difficulties," Edgar went on, more seriously. "You will advance objections, I know, but you must permit your objections to be overruled. Accident can be combated by artifice, and to artifice you must resort until nature does her work and relieves you from the new necessity."

We fought out the question, and at last I very unwillingly gave way, and submitted to the adoption of a false eyebrow, a false moustache, and a beautiful tuft of curly false hair much superior to my own, to hide the bald patch left by the accident.

Rather elated by this distinct improvement, assumed for the reception of Helen's promised visit, and encouraged by the assurances that my own hair would soon grow again and enable me to discard its substitutes, I was ready to believe that the discoloration and disfigurement still visible were comparatively unimportant, and that the repellent expression, which no artifice much abated, might indeed affect strangers, but would not, in the sight of my friends, obscure their long-established impression of my amiability and sweetness.

Sir Wilfred and Lady Speke had by this time gone up to town, leaving the place, with many kind wishes for my early and complete recovery, entirely at the disposal of myself and my unwearied nurse Edgar.

So a day was fixed for the arrival of Helen and her mother. On that eventful afternoon Edgar settled me in a small sitting-room on the same floor with the room I had been occupying, before starting for the station. The blinds were drawn, and I sat with my back to this carefully-softened light. I wished, now that the ordeal was getting so near, that I had not let myself be dissuaded from my intention of sneaking quietly away without showing my disfigured face to any one. What was the use of my seeing the child again? I did indeed long foolishly for a few last words with her since she had shown unexpected depth of feeling towards me in my misfortune; but it could not end, as Edgar still obstinately hoped, in a renewal of our engagement, which I persisted in regarding as definitely broken. The meeting was only for a farewell. I was ashamed of the artifices I had used to conceal the traces of my accident, and I was feeling half inclined to tear off my false ornaments and present myself in my true hideousness, when the arrival of my visitors luckily stopped me. The room where I sat was at the back of the house, so that I had no warning of the return of the carriage until I heard Edgar's voice. I sprang up with one last look of agony at my reflection in the glass, which seemed to me at that moment a ghastly caricature of my old self, and then sat nervously down again, feeling like a doomed wretch with the executioner outside his cell.

The door opened, and Edgar bounded up to me, dragging Helen, who seemed shy and nervous, forward on his arm.

"Here he is, Nellie. Getting well fast, you see. Where is mother? I must fetch her up."

I saw in a moment through the dear clumsy fellow's manœuvres. He prided himself on his strategy, fancying he had only to leave us together for us to have a touching reconciliation. But I knew better. I saw her turn pale and cling to her brother's arm, and I said hastily—

"No, no. Lady Castleford is not far behind, you may be sure. I am glad to see you, Lady Helen; it is very kind of you to come. It is easier——"

"Helen has come to persuade you to get well in England among your friends instead of going abroad to be ill among strangers," said Edgar, cutting me short. "He's getting on well, isn't he, Helen? Come, he's well enough to have his hand shaken now."

He drew her forward, to my inexpressible pain, for I saw the reluctance in her face. Before I could attempt a protest, a reassuring word, she had held out her hand, which I timidly took. Then she lifted her eyes to my face for the first time. For the first and last time I saw the expression of the most vivid, most acute emotion on the fairy face. The muscles were contracted, the pupils of the eyes were dilated with intense horror.

"I am very glad——" she began.

Then, before she could finish her sentence, even while I still held her little hand in mine, she fell like a crushed flower unconscious in her brother's arms.

Poor fellow! How contrite, how miserably, abjectly humble and despairing he was when he appeared later in my room, to which I had fled, like a wounded beast to its den, when little Helen's unwilling blow gave me my social death-warrant. I was able to laugh then, and to tell him truly that my only regret

was for the pain the injudicious meeting had caused poor Helen.

"It was you who dictated her letter to me," I said.

Edgar did not attempt to deny it.

"She ought to be ashamed of herself," said he, reddening with indignation.

"No, we ought to be ashamed of ourselves. I for my vanity in thinking there was any charm in my dull personality to compensate for the loss of the only merit I could have in a girl's eyes; you for your generous idiotcy in carrying that mistake farther still. Are they gone?"

"Yes. My mother wanted to see you, but——"

"That's all right. And now, old fellow, you mustn't make any more blunders on my account; you must let me make my own. I leave England in a few days."

"Well, I suppose you must do as you like. I'll come and see you off."

"No," said I firmly. "I shall say good-bye to you here, Edgar. I have very particular reasons for it, and you must give way to me in this."

He tried to change my mind; he wanted to know my reasons; but he was unsuccessful in both attempts. I knew how obstinate he was, and that if I once allowed him to go with me to town, he would be sure to subject me to more painful meetings in the endeavour to persuade me to remain in England. Luckily for me, the very next day the Marquis telegraphed to his son to join him immediately in Monmouthshire; and no sooner had Edgar left the house, with the sure knowledge that he should not see me again, than I fulfilled his fears by instant preparation for my own departure. I had discarded all

disguises, and contented myself by masking my face as much as possible with a travelling cap and a muffler; on arriving in town I went to an hotel in Covent Garden, where I was not known, and by the evening of the following day I had provided myself with the outfit of a Transpontine villain, a low-crowned, wide-brimmed soft hat and a black Spanish cloak.

In this get-up, which, when not made too conspicuous by a stage-walk and melodramatic glances around, is really a very efficient disguise both of form and features, I knew myself to be quite safe from recognition anywhere, and having decided to start from Charing Cross for Cologne by way of Ostend on the following morning, I devoted the evening of my second day in town to a last look round.

CHAPTER IV

IT was Saturday evening; a week of fog having been succeeded by a week of rain, the pavements were now well coated with black slimy mud, in which one kept one's footing as best one could, stimulated by plentiful showers of the same substance, in a still more fluid state, flung by the wheels of passing vehicles.

Oh, wisely-governed city, where there is work for thousands of starving men, while thousands of men are starving for want of work! If a boy can keep a crossing clean in a crowded thoroughfare, could not an organised gang of men, ten times as numerous and twice as active as our gentle scavengers, save the sacred boots, skirts, and trousers of the respectable classes from that brush-resisting abomination, London mud? I respectfully recommend this suggestion to

my betters with the assurance that, if it is considered of any value, there are plenty more where that came from.

Starting from Covent Garden, I made my way through King Street, Garrick Street, Cranbourne Street, Leicester Square and Coventry Street, into Regent Street, and was struck by a hundred common London sights and incidents which, in the old days, when my own life was so idle and yet so absorbing, had entirely escaped my notice. Oxford Street, Bond Street, Piccadilly, St. James's Street, I made the tour of them all; past the clubs, of many of which I was a member, brushing, unrecognised, by a dozen men who had known me well, into Trafalgar Square, where the gas-lamps cast long glittering lines of light on the wet pavement, and the spire of St. Martin's and the dome of the National Gallery rose like gray shadow-palaces above in the rainy air.

I dined at a restaurant in the Strand, and then, growing confident in the security of my disguise, I thought I would take a farewell glance at an old chum who had run Edgar pretty close in my esteem. He was an actor, and was fulfilling an engagement at a theatre in the Strand. When I add that he played what are technically called "juvenile" parts—that is to say, those of the stage lovers—my taste may seem strange, until I explain that Fabian Scott was the very worst of all the fashionable "juveniles," being addicted to literary and artistic pursuits and other intellectual exercises which, while permissible and innocuous to what are called "character" actors, are ruin to "juveniles," whose business requires vigour rather than thought, picturesqueness rather than feeling. So that Fabian, with his thin keen face, his

intensity, and some remnant of North-country stiffness, stood only in the second rank of those whom the ladies delighted to worship; and becoming neither a great artist nor a great popinjay, gave his friends a sense of not having done quite the best with himself, but was a very interesting, if somewhat excitable companion. For my own part I had then, not knowing how vitally important the question of his character would one day become to me, nothing to wish for in him save that he were a little less soul and a little more sincere.

The stage-door was up a narrow and dirty court leading from the Strand. At the opening of the court stood a stout fair man, who looked like a German, and whose coarse, swollen face and dull eyes bore witness to a life of low dissipation. He was respectably but not well dressed, and he swung the cheap and showy walking-stick in his hand slowly backwards and forwards, in a stolidly swaggering and aggressive manner. I should not have noticed him so particularly, but for the fact that he filled the narrow entrance to the passage so completely that I had to ask him to let me pass. Instead of immediately complying, he looked at me from my feet to my head with surly, half-tipsy insolence and gave a short thick laugh.

"Oh, so you're one of the swells, I suppose, who come hanging round stage-doors to tempt hard-working respectable women away from their lawful husbands! But it won't do. I tell you it won't do!"

I pushed him aside with one vigorous thrust and went up the court, followed by the outraged gentleman, who made no attempt to molest me except by a torrent of abusive eloquence, from which I gathered that he was the husband of one of the actresses at the

theatre, and that she did not appreciate the virtues of her lord and master as he considered she ought, but that, nevertheless, he persisted in affording her the protection of his manly arm, and would do so in spite of all the d——d "mashers" in London.

At this point the stage-doorkeeper came out of his little box, and informed the angry gentleman that if he went on disgracing the place by his scandalous conduct his wife's services would be dispensed with; "and if there's no money for her to earn, there'll be no beer for you to drink, Mr. Ellmer," continued the little old man with more point than politeness.

The threat had instant effect. Mr. Ellmer subsided into indignant mumbling, and went down the court again.

I had forgotten myself in interest at the rout of Mr. Ellmer, to whom I had taken a rabid dislike, and was standing in the full, if feeble light of the gas over the stage-door, when an inner door was thrust open, and the next moment Fabian Scott was shaking my hand heartily.

"Hallo, Harry! I am glad to see you again. I was afraid you were going away without a word to your old friends; but you were always better than your reputation. Got over your accident all right—eh?"

"As well as could be expected, I suppose. I start for Germany to-morrow."

"Ah!" By this one exclamation he signified that he understood the case, and knew that my mind was definitely made up. Actors are men of the world, and I felt the relief of talking to him after the stolid and obstinate misapprehension with which dear old Edgar persisted in meeting my reasons for saying

good-bye to society. "It was good of you not to go without coming here," he went on, appreciating the fact that my visit must have entailed an effort.

"To tell the truth, I meant to see you without your seeing me; but I got interested in a moral victory just obtained by your door-keeper over an eloquent visitor, and so you caught me."

Scott glanced at the swaggering Ellmer.

"Drunken brute!" said he, with much disgust. "His wife—a hard-working little woman, who acts under the name of Miss Bailey—has had to bring her child to the theatre with her to-night, for fear he should get home before her and frighten the poor little thing. Look, here they come. One wonders how a wild beast can be the father of an angel."

Scott was an ardent worshipper of beauty; but I, a cooler mortal, could not think his raptures excessive when he stood aside to make way for a slim, pale, pretty woman, to whose hand there clung a child so beautiful that my whole heart revolted at the thought that the tipsy ruffian a few paces off was her father. Both mother and child were shabbily dressed, in clothes which gave one the idea that November had overtaken them before they could afford to replace the garments of July. The little one was about eight years old, a slender creature with a flower-like face, round which, from under a home-made red velvet cap, her light-brown hair fell in a naturally curly tangle.

Something in her blue eyes reminded me of the childlike charm of Helen's. Scott stopped them to say good-night, effusively addressing the child as his little sweetheart, and telling her that if the boy who gave her an apple last Sunday gave her another the

next day, he should find out where he lived and murder that boy.

"Beware, Babiole, of arousing the jealousy of a desperate man," he ended, folding his arms and tossing back his head.

The child took his outburst quite seriously.

"If he offers me another apple I must take it," she answered in a sweet demure little voice. "It would be rude to refuse. But you needn't be angry, for I can like you too."

"Like me *too!*" thundered Scott, with melodramatic gestures. "Heaven and earth! This is how the girl dares to trifle with the fiercest passion that ever surged in a human breast!"

"If you're fierce I shan't like you," said the little one, in her measured way. "Papa's fierce, and he frightens me and mamma."

"Will you like me, little madam?" I ventured; and, knowing that my disfigured face was well concealed, I held out my hand. "I will love you very gently."

I made my voice as soft as I could, but the deep tones or the sombre, black figure frightened her. The quaint matronly demeanour suddenly gave way to a child's fright, and she hid her face in the folds of her mother's black cloth jacket. Then mamma began to rebuke in a voice and manner oddly like the child's; and Fabian seized Babiole and lifted her up to kiss her.

"And now will you give me a kiss?" said he to her.

"Yes, Mr. Scott." She gave him a kiss with the same demure simplicity.

"And will you promise to kiss nobody but me till you see me again?"

"Really Mr. Scott," interrupted the mother rather tartly, "you shouldn't put such ideas into the child's head. They'll come quite soon enough of their own accord."

She had one eye upon her husband, who was waiting farther down the court; and the wifely desire to be "at him" seemed to put a little extra vinegar into her tone. With a hasty good-night to Fabian, and a frosty little bow to the unknown black figure, she said, "Come, Babiole," and hurried away with the child.

Scott put his arm through mine, and we followed them slowly back into the Strand, where, amidst the throng of people who had just poured out of the theatres, we soon lost sight of them. We did not go far together, for Fabian had an appointment to supper; but before we parted, he, more ready-witted than Edgar, had talked me into a promise that, when the summer came round and he had a chance of a holiday, I would let him know where I was, that he might invite himself to come and see me.

"You don't think I shall come back among you again, then?" I said curiously.

"I don't know. The taste for wandering, like all other tastes, grows with indulgence. Good-bye, Harry, and God bless you wherever you go."

I wrung his hand, scarcely able to speak. His words were a prophecy, I knew; and at the moment of taking this last outsider's look at the scenes of my old life, it seemed to me that a dungeon-door had swung to on youth and hope and happiness, shutting me in for ever to a very lonely solitude.

"Good-bye, good-bye, Fabian," said I, and I walked

hastily away lest I should keep on wringing his hand all night.

For three hours more I walked about the London streets, unable to tear myself away from them, sneaking again past the clubs, with a feeling of gushing affection towards a score of idiotic young men and prosy old ones who passed me on the pavement on their way in or out, devoured by a longing to exchange if only half a dozen words with men whom I had often avoided as bores. Near the steps of the Carlton I did try to address one quiet old gentleman whom, on account of his rapacity for papers, I had cordially hated. A ridiculous shyness made me hoarse; and on hearing a husky voice close to his ears in almost apologetic tones, he started violently, cried, "Eh, what? No, no! Here—hansom!" and I retreated like one of the damned.

I got into Grosvenor Square, passed through a throng of carriages, and saw the bright lights in a house where they were giving a birthday dance to which I had been specially invited months before. Helen would be there, I knew; I felt a jealous satisfaction in remembering that old Saxmundham was away, nursing his gout at Torquay. What of that? There were plenty of other men to step into my shoes. At first I thought I would stay, and walk up and down the square for the chance of one more look at her. How well I knew how she would come down the steps, in a timid hesitating way, half-dazzled by the lights she had just left, poising each little dainty foot a moment above the next step, flit into the carriage like a soft, white bird, and drop her pretty head back with a sigh, "Oh, I'm so tired, mamma!" her white throat curved gently above the

swansdown of her cloak, the golden fringe of curls falling limply almost to her eyebrows. I must wait —I must see her again! What! On the arm of another man! The blood rushed into my head as these incoherent thoughts rose rapidly in my mind; all the passions of my life, of my youth, dammed up as they had suddenly been by my accident and its fatal consequences, seemed to surge up, break through the barriers of resignation and resolve and make a madman of me. I was not master of myself, I could not count upon what I should do if I saw her; seeing my way no more than if I had been blind or intoxicated, I turned away, and finding myself presently in silent Bond Street, I got into a hansom and went back to my hotel.

I fancied that night that sooner or later I should end by suicide; but in the morning I had to pack, to buy things for my journey, and set out on my travels. The worst wrench was over; before I had left England a week, I was almost a philosopher.

For five years I lived a wanderer's life, and found it fairly to my liking. I hunted the boar in Germany, the wolf in France, went salmon-fishing in Norway, shot two tigers in India; got as far as California in search of adventures, of which I had plenty; passed a fortnight with Red Indians, whom on the whole I prefer in pictures; and began to acquire a distaste for civilisation, mitigated by enjoyment of meetings once a year with Edgar and Fabian Scott.

I retained the lease of a shooting-box and of a few miles of deer-forest by the Dee-side, between Ballater and picturesque little Loch Muick. Larkhall, as the house was called, became, therefore, our yearly rendezvous. On our second meeting, the party was

increased by a new member, Mr. William Fussell, a gentleman who was "something in the City." I never could quite make out what that something was, but it must have been some exceedingly pleasant and lucrative profession, since Mr. Fussell, while constantly describing himself as one of the unlucky ones, was always in spirits high, not to say rollicking, and was gifted with powers of enjoyment which could only be the result of long and assiduous practice. I had met him at a German hotel, where I had been struck by the magnificent insolence of his assertion that he had acquired a thorough command of the German language in three weeks, and by the astonishing measure of success which attended his daring plunges into that tongue. He was serenely jolly, selfish and sociable, pathetically complaining of his wife's conduct in letting him come away for his holiday by himself, and enjoying himself very much without her. He was so envious of my good fortune when I said that I was going boar-hunting, that I invited him to accompany me, and as he showed much pluck in a rather nasty encounter we had with an infuriated boar, and much frankness in owning afterwards that he was frightened, I forthwith invited him to Scotland, and he accepted the invitation, as he did all good things which came in his way, with avidity.

At the third of our yearly meetings a fifth and last member joined us. This was a clever young Irishman, of good family, small fortune, sickly body, and still sicklier mind, to whom accident had put me under a small obligation, which I was glad to repay by enabling him to visit the Highlands, to which his doctor had prescribed a visit. He had been making an exhaustive and strictly philosophical inquiry into

the iniquities of Paris, in the corruption of which he appeared to revel; indeed, he was clever enough to find so much depravity in every spot he had visited, that I wondered what repulsive view he would be able to take of our sweet-scented fir-forests, and the long miles of the rippling winding Dee; or whether, in the absence of labyrinthine mazes of dirt and disease, vice and crime to explore and minutely expose, he would pine and die.

Except these two, I had, during those five years of wandering, made no new friend. My appalling ugliness, mitigated as it was by time, had, together with the reserve it taught me, to a great degree isolated me. But perfect independence has its pleasures, and I was not an unhappy man. Until the end of the fourth year I had not even a servant, and I avoided all women; at that point, however, I yielded to the fatal human weakness of attaching to one's self some fellow-creature, and engaged as my personal attendant a cosmopolitan individual, whose qualifications for the post consisted in the fact that he had been a lawyer's clerk in England, a cow-boy in Mexico, had had charge of a lunatic at Naples, and was a deserter from the Austrian army. Plain to begin with, deeply marked with smallpox, and disfigured by a sabre-cut across the nose, he was even uglier than I, a fact which seemed, from the frequency with which he alluded to it, to gratify him as much as it did me. His name was John Ferguson, but it did not occur to me to connect his name with his origin until the time came to prepare for my fifth annual visit to Scotland.

"I should have thought one plain countenance about you was enough, sir, without your wanting to

see them at every turn," he said ill-temperedly, when told to pack up.

"I suppose you come from Auld Reekie yourself, then, since you're so reluctant to go back to it?"

"Well, sir, and where's the harm of being born there, provided you get away from it as early as you can, and never go back to it till you can help!"

"Why, Ferguson, that's spoken like a true patriot."

"Indeed, sir, I hope I am wise enough not to hold a place the better for having produced such a poor creature as myself," said John, who could always give a good account of himself in an argument.

But once established at Larkhall, Ferguson found himself so comfortable that, at the end of the fortnight's visit of my friends, he again made objection to packing up, which I was in the mood to listen to indulgently.

"It seems a pity like to leave the place till the shooting season's over, don't it, sir?" he hazarded one morning.

"Yes, Ferguson, perhaps it does."

"The Continent wouldn't run away if it was left to look after itself a few weeks longer, would it, sir?" he went on.

"No, Ferguson, perhaps it wouldn't," said I.

"Shall I leave the packing till to-morrow, sir?" he then asked.

"Well, yes, I think you may."

From which it is clear that Ferguson had already been shrewd enough to assume a proper authority over his nominal master.

I had become a little weary of wandering, and although I by no means intended to give up the nomadic life which I had led for five years, I thought

a couple of months' rest would be a pleasant change; I could be on the move before the cold weather set in. But September passed, and October and November came, and it grew very bleak; and still I stayed on, finding a new pleasure in the changed aspect of the gaunt hills, in seeing the snow patches grow larger and larger on Lochnagar, in outstaying the last of the late visitors, and in finding a spot where solitude needed no seeking.

The railway runs from Aberdeen to Ballater. One morning, arriving at the little station for my papers, I found a train just starting, and was seized by an impulse to pay a short visit to the granite city. A feeling left by my wandering life made it always difficult for me to see a train or a boat start without me. So I sent a boy to Larkhall with a message to Ferguson, who, with a lad under him, constituted my entire household, took my ticket and started. It was past five when I reached Aberdeen; after a sharp walk to the brig o' Balgownie and back, I hired a private room at an hotel, and dined by myself. Making inquiries about the theatre, I learnt that the entertainment that week was very poor, and further that it had been so badly patronised that it was doubtful whether the unfortunate players would get their meagre salaries. I was glancing at the yellow bill which advertised "Rob Roy" as a Saturday night attraction, when I read the names of Miss Bailey and Miss Babiole Bailey.

I got up at once and walked quickly down to the little theatre.

CHAPTER V

I REMEMBER very little of the performance that night, except the painful impression produced upon me by the sight of the effort with which a tall spectre-like woman, with sunken hollow face and feeble voice, in whom I with difficulty recognised pretty Mrs. Ellmer, dragged herself through the part of Diana Vernon. Babiole I utterly failed to distinguish. Looking out as I did for my little eight-year old fairy, with gold-brown hair curling naturally in large loose rings over her blue eyes, I could not be expected to know that an awkward sparrow-legged minion of the king, wearing high boots, a tabard, and a parson's wideawake pinned up and ornamented with a long white feather, was what five years and a limited stage wardrobe had made of the lovely child.

I waited for them at the stage door a long time after the performance was over, saw the rest of the little company come out in twos and threes, one or two depressed and silent, but most of them loudly cursing their manager, the Scotch nation in general, and the people of Aberdeen in particular. Then the manager himself came out with his wife, a buxom lady who had played Helen Macgregor with a good deal of spirit, but who seemed, from the stoical forbearance with which she received the outpourings of her husband's wrath at his ill-luck, to be a disappointingly mild and meek person in private life. "But what will they do, Bob? I believe the mother's dying," I heard her protest gently. "Can't help that.

We must look out for ourselves. And Marie will make a better juvenile at half Miss Bailey's screw," said her husband gruffly. Last of all came Mrs. Ellmer, thinner and shabbier than ever, leaning on the arm of an over-grown girl a little shorter than herself, whose childishly meagre skirts were in odd contrast with the protecting old-fashioned manner in which she supported her mother, and whispered to her not to cry, they would be all right.

I made myself known rather awkwardly, for when I raised my hat and said, "Mrs. Ellmer, I think," they only walked on a little faster. The case was too serious with them, however, for me to allow myself to be easily rebuffed. I followed them with a long and lame speech of introduction.

"Don't you remember—five years ago—in the Strand, when you were acting at the 'Vaudeville'—Mr. Fabian Scott?"

Babiole stopped and whispered something; Mrs. Ellmer stopped too, and held out her hand with a wan smile and a sudden change to a rather effusive manner.

"I beg your pardon, I am sure. I remember perfectly, Mr. Scott introduced you to me as a very old friend of his. You will excuse me, won't you? One doesn't expect to see gentlemen from Town in these uncivilised parts. Babiole, my dear, you remember Mr. ——"

"Maude," said I. "It is very good of you to remember me at all, after such a long time. But I couldn't resist the temptation of speaking to you; one sees, as you say, so few beings up here whom one likes to call fellow-creatures. Miss Babiole, you've 'growed out of knowledge.' I suppose you

haven't seen much of our friend Fabian lately, Mrs. Ellmer?"

"No, indeed. I went on tour at the end of the season when I first had the pleasure of meeting you, and we have been touring ever since."

"Don't you get tired of the incessant travelling? I suppose you seldom stay more than a week at each place?"

"Sometimes only two or three nights. It is extremely fatiguing. In fact, I am going to take a rest for a short time, for I find the nightly work too much for me in my present state of health," said she, with a brave attempt to check the tremor in her voice, which was unspeakably piteous to me who knew the true reason of the "rest."

"If you are going to stay in Aberdeen, I hope you will allow me to call upon you. I live near Ballater, forty miles away in the country, so you may guess how thankfully I snatch at a chance of seeing a little society"

At the word "society" Mrs. Ellmer laughed almost hysterically

"I am afraid you would find solitude livelier than our society," she said, with a pitiful attempt to be sprightly.

"Well, will you let me try?"

"Really, Mr. Maude, when we are in the country we live in such a very quiet way. Of course it's different when one is in Town and has one's own servants; and these Scotch people have no notion of waiting at table or serving things decently."

"I know, I know," I broke in eagerly. "I'm used to all that myself. Why, I live in a tumble-down old house with a monkey and a soldier for my household,

so you may judge that I have got used to the discomforts of the North."

I saw Babiole stealthily shake her mother's arm, and move her lips in a faint "Yes, yes." Reluctantly, and with more excuses for having let the agent-in-advance take lodgings for them which they would not have looked at had they known what a low neighbourhood they were in, Mrs. Ellmer at last consented that I should call and take tea with them next day.

I went back to my hotel and engaged a room for the night. The poor woman's sunken face haunted me even in my sleep; and I grew nervous when half-past four came, lest I should hear on arriving at the bare and dirty-looking stone house which I had already taken care to find out, that she was dead. However, my fears had run away with me. On my knocking at the door of the top flat of the little house, Babiole opened it, pretty and smiling, in a simple dress of some sort of brown stuff, with lace and a red necklace round her fair slim throat. She had not seen my face before by daylight; and I saw, by the flash of horror that passed quickly over her features and was gone, how much the sight shocked her.

"I was afraid you would forget to come, perhaps," she said, in the prim little way I remembered, as she led the way into a small room, in which no one less used to the shifts of travel than I was could have detected the ingenious artifices by which a washhand-stand became a sideboard, and a wardrobe a book-case. The popular Scotch plan of sleeping in a cupboard disposed of the bed.

Mrs. Ellmer looked better. Whether influenced by her daughter's keen perception that I was a friend in time of need, or pleasantly excited at the novelty of

receiving a visitor, there was more spontaneity than I had expected in her voluble welcome, more brightness in the inevitable renewal of her excuses for the simplicity of their surroundings. To me, after my long exile from everything fair or gentle in the way of womanhood, the bare little room was luxurious enough with that pretty young creature in it; for Babiole, though she had lost much of her childish beauty, and was rapidly approaching the "gawky" stage of a tall girl's development, had a softness in her blue eyes when she looked at her mother, which now seemed to me more charming than the keen glance of unusual intellect. She had, too, the natural refinement of all gentle natures, and had had enough stage training to be more graceful than girls of her age generally are. Altogether, she interested me greatly, so that I cast about in my mind for some way of effectually helping them, without destroying all chance of my meeting them soon again.

Babiole brought in the tea herself, while Mrs. Ellmer carefully explained that Mrs. Firth, the landlady, had such odd notions of laying the table and such terribly noisy manners, that, for the sake of her mother's nerves, Babiole had undertaken this little domestic duty herself. But, from a glimpse I caught later of Mrs. Firth's hands, as she held the kitchen-door to spy at my exit from behind it, I think there may have been stronger reasons for keeping her in the background when an aristocratic and presumably cleanly visitor was about.

Babiole did not talk much, but when, in the course of the evening, I fell to describing Larkhall and the country around it, in deference to poor Mrs. Ellmer's thirsty wish to know more of the rollicking luxury of

my bachelor home, the girl's eyes seemed to grow larger with intense interest; and, after a quick glance at my face, which had, I saw, an unspeakable horror for her, she fixed her eyes on the fire, and remained as quiet as a statue while I enlarged on the good qualities of my monkey, my birds, my dog, and the view from my study window of the Muick just visible now between the bare branches of the birch-trees.

"I should like to live right among the hills like that," she said softly, when her mother had exhausted her expressions of admiration.

"Would you? You would find it very lonely. In winter you would be snowed up, as I shall most certainly be in a week or two; and even when the roads are passable you don't meet any one on them, except, perhaps, a couple of peasants, whose language would be to you as unintelligible as that of wild animals going down into the village to get food."

"But you can live there."

"Circumstances have made me solitary everywhere."

She looked up at me; her face flushed, her lips trembled with unutterable pity, and the tears sprang to her eyes.

Custom had long since made me callous to instinctive aversion, but this most unexpected burst of intelligent sympathy made my heart leap up. I said nothing, and began to play with the table-cloth.

Mrs. Ellmer, in the belief that the pause was an awkward one, rushed into the breach, and disturbed my sweet feeling rather uncouthly.

"I am sure, Mr. Maude, no one thinks the worse of you for the accident, whatever it was, that disfigured

you. For my part, I always prefer plain men to handsome ones; they're more intelligent, and don't think so much of themselves."

Babiole gave her mother an alarmed pleading look, which happily absorbed my attention and neutralised the effect of this speech. I could have borne worse things than poor Mrs. Ellmer's rather tactless and insipid conversation for the sake of watching her daughter's mobile little face, and I am afraid they must have wished me away long before I could make up my mind to go. Babiole came to the outer door with me, and I seized the opportunity to ask her what they were going to do.

"Mrs. Ellmer doesn't look strong enough to act again at present," I suggested.

The girl's face clouded.

"No. And even if she were, you see——" She stopped.

"Of course. Her place would be filled up?"

"Yes," very sorrowfully Then she looked up again, her face grown suddenly bright and hopeful, as with a flash of sunshine. "But you needn't be afraid for us. Mamma is so clever, and I am young and strong; we shall be all right. We should be all right now if only——"

"If only?"

"Why, you see, you mustn't think it's mamma's fault that we are left in a corner like this; you don't know how she can save and manage on—oh! so little. But whenever she has, by care and making things do, saved up a little money, it—it all goes, you know."

The sudden reserve which showed itself in her ingenuous manner towards the last words was so very

suggestive that the true explanation of this phenomenon flashed upon my mind.

"Then somebody else puts in a claim," I suggested.

The girl laughed a little, her full and sensitive red lips opening widely over ivory-white even teeth, and she nodded appreciation of my quick perception.

"Somebody else wants such a lot of things that somebody else's wife and daughter can do without," she said, with a comical little look of resignation. And, encouraged by my sympathetic silence, she went on, "And he has so much talent, Mr. Maude. If he would only go on painting as poor mamma goes on acting, he could make us all rich—if he liked. And instead of that——"

"Babiole!" cried her mother's voice, rather tartly.

"Yes, mamma." Then she added, low and quickly, with a frightened glance back in the dusk, towards the door of their room, "It's high treason to say even so much as this, but it is so hard to know how she tries and yet not to speak of it to any one. I don't mean to blame my father, Mr. Maude, but you know what men are——"

It seemed to occur to her that this was an indiscreet remark, but I said, "Yes, yes," with entire concurrence; for indeed who should know what men were better than I? After this she seemed as anxious to get rid of me as civility allowed, but I had something to say.

I gabbled it out fast and nervously, in a husky whisper, lest mamma's sharp ear should catch my proposal, and she should nip it in the bud.

"Look here, Miss Babiole; if you like the hills, and you don't mind the cold, and your mother wants a rest and a change, listen. I was just going to

advertise for some one to act as caretaker in a little lodge I've got—scarcely more than a cottage, but a little place I don't want to go to rack and ruin. If you and she could exist there in the winter—it is a place where peat may be had for the asking, and it really isn't an uncomfortable little box, and I can't tell you what a service you would be doing me if you would persuade your mother to live in it until—until I find a tenant, you know. In summer I can get a splendid rent for the place, tiny as it is, if only I can find some one to keep it from going to pieces in the meantime. It's not badly furnished," I hurried on mendaciously, "and there's an old woman to do the housework——"

But here Babiole, who had been drinking in my words with parted lips and starlight eyes like a child at its first pantomime, dazzled, bewildered, delighted, drew herself straight up, and became suddenly prim.

"In that case, Mr. Maude," said she, with demure pride that resented the suspicion of charity, "if the old woman can take care of the house, surely she doesn't want two other people to take care of her."

"But I tell you she's dead!" I burst out angrily, annoyed at my blundering. "There was an old woman to look after the place, but she was seventy-four, and she died the week before last, of old age—nothing infectious. Now, look here; you tell your mother about it, and see if you can't persuade her to oblige me. I'm sure the change would do her good, for it's very healthy there. Why, you know the Queen lives within eight miles of my house, and you may be sure her Majesty wouldn't be allowed to live anywhere where the air wasn't good. Now, will you promise to try?"

She said "Yes," and I knew, from the low earnest whisper in which she breathed out the word, that she meant it with all her soul I left her and almost ran back to my hotel, as excited as a schoolboy, longing for the next morning to come, so that I could go back to Broad Street, and learn the fate of my new freak. Any one who had witnessed my anxiety would have decided at once that I must be in love with either the mother or the daughter; but I was not. The promise of a new interest in life, of a glimpse of pleasant society up in my hills, and the fancy we all occasionally have for being kind to something, were all as strong as my pity for the mother, my admiration for the daughter, and my respect for both.

I was debating next morning how soon it would be discreet to call, when a note was brought to me, which had been left "by a young lady" I tore it open like a frantic lover. It was from Mrs. Ellmer, an oddly characteristic letter, alternately frosty and gushing, but not without the dignity of the hard-working. She said a great deal ceremoniously about my kindness, a great deal about her friends in London, her position and that of "my husband, a well-known artist, whom you doubtless are acquainted with by name." But she wound up by saying that since her health required that she should have change of air, and since I had been so very kind that she could scarcely refuse to do me any service which she could conscientiously perform, she would be happy to act as caretaker of my house, and to keep it in order during the winter for future tenants, provided I would be kind enough to understand that she and her daughter would do all the work of the house, and

further that they might be permitted to reside in a strictly private manner.

"Strictly private!" I laughed heartily to myself at this expression. The dear lady could hardly wish for more privacy than she would get with four or five feet of snow piled up before her door. I was quite light-hearted at my success, and I had to tone down my manner to its usual grave and melancholy pitch before I knocked again at their door.

Mrs. Ellmer opened the door herself, thus disappointing me a little; Babiole's simple confidences, which I liked to think were the result not only of natural frankness, but of instinctive trust in me, were pleasanter to listen to than her mother's more artificial conversation. We were both very dignified, both ceremoniously grateful to each other, and when we entered the sitting-room and began to discuss preliminaries in a somewhat pompous and long-winded manner, Babiole sat, quiet as a mouse, in a corner, as if afraid to disturb by a breath the harmonious settlement of a plan on which she had set her heart.

At last all was arranged. It was now Monday; Mrs. Ellmer and her daughter were to hold themselves in readiness to enter into possession by the following Friday or Saturday, when I should return to Aberdeen to escort them to Larkhall Lodge. I rose to take my leave, not with the easy feeling of equality of the day before, but with deep humility, and repeated assurances of gratitude, to which Mrs. Ellmer replied with mild and dignified protest.

But, in the passage, Babiole danced lightly along to the door like a kitten, and holding up her finger as a sign to me to keep silence, she clapped her hands

noiselessly and nodded to me several times in deliciously confiding freemasonry.

"I worked hard for it," she said at last in a very soft whisper, her red lips forming the words carefully, near to my ear. "Good-bye, Mr. Maude," she then said aloud and demurely, but with her eyes dancing. And she gave my hand a warm squeeze as she shook it, and let me out into the nipping Scotch air in the gloom of the darkening afternoon, with a new and odd sense of a flash of brightness and warmth into the world.

Then I walked quickly along, devising by what means that cottage, which my guilty soul told me was bare of a single stick, could be furnished and habitable by Friday And a cold chill crept through my bones as a new and hitherto unthought-of question thrust itself up in my mind:

What would Ferguson say?

CHAPTER VI.

I MADE a hasty tour of the second-hand shops in Aberdeen, being wise enough to know that if she were to find the cottage too spick and span, Mrs. Ellmer would in a moment discover my pious fraud. Having got together in this way a very odd assortment of furniture, I was rather at a loss about kitchen utensils, when I was seized with the happy inspiration of buying a new set of them for my own service, and handing over those at present in use in my kitchen to Mrs. Ellmer. Not knowing much about these things, I had to buy in a wholesale fashion, more, I fancy, to the advantage of the seller than to

my own. However, the business was got through somehow, the things were to be sent on the following day, and I sneaked back to Ballater by the 4.35 train, wondering how I should break the news to Ferguson and wishing that by some impossible good luck the immaculate one might have committed in my absence some slight breach of discipline which would give me for once the superior position. If I could only find him drunk! But though second to none in his fondness for whiskey, nobody but himself could tell when he had had more than enough; so that hope was vain.

It was not that I was afraid of Ferguson; far from it. But his punctuality, his unflagging mechanical industry, his many uncompromising virtues made him a person to be reckoned with; and it would have been easier to own to a caprice inconsistent with one's principles to a more intellectual person than to him.

It was getting dark before the train stopped at Ballater, a few minutes before six. I had to go through the village, over the rickety wooden bridge—for the new one of stone was not built then—and along the road which lies on the south side of the Dee. The hills were on my left, their bases covered with slim birch-trees, whose bare branches swayed and hissed like whips in the winter wind; on the right, below the road, ran the crooked turbulent little stream of Dee, now swollen with late autumn rains, swirling round its many curves, and rushing between the piles of the bridge till the wooden structure rocked again. Would those two delicate women be frightened away by the cold and the loneliness from the nest I was building for them, I wondered, as I turned to the

right to cross the little stone bridge that arches over the Muick just before that stream runs into the Dee. I stopped and looked around me. There was a faint white light over the western hills which enabled me to see dim outlines of the objects I knew. Just beyond the bridge was the forsaken little churchyard of Glenmuick, which not even a ghost would care to haunt, where now a cluster of gaunt bare ash-trees thrust up spectral arms from the ground among the mildewed grave-stones. The lonely manse, a plain stone house shadowed by dark evergreens, stood back a little from the road on the opposite side. A mile away, with the rushing Dee between, the spire of Ballater church stood up among the roofs of the village, flanked by fir-crowned Craigen-darrock on the north, and the Pannanich Hills on the south. Straight on my road lay between flat Lowland fields to a ragged fringe of tall firs behind which, on a rising ground, the shell of an old deserted dwelling, known as Knock Castle, served in summer as a meagre shelter for the Highland sheep in sudden storms. At this point the road turned sharply to the left, the fringe of fir-trees growing thicker upon the skirts of the forest; a few paces farther this road divided into two branches which struck off from each other in the form of a V, the southernmost one leading to Larkhall through a mile of fir-forest. Would the very approach of their new abode through this dark and winding road depress the poor little women into looking upon the cottage as a prison, after the life and movement they were used to?

The private road which led through my own plantation to the house was divided from the public thoroughfare by no lodge, no gate, but ran modestly

down between borders of grass, which grew long and rank in the summertime, for about half a mile, until, the larches and Scotch firs growing more sparsely to the south, one caught wider and wider glimpses of broad green meadows where two or three horses were turned out to find a meagre pasture. Here the drive was carried over a little iron ornamental bridge, which crossed a stream that was but a thread in the warm weather ; and leaving the grass and the trees behind, one came upon a broad lawn which ran right up to the walls of the house, flanked to the north by more grass and more trees, which shut out the view of the stables and of the unused cottage. To the south the land made a sudden dip, and the hollow thus formed was laid out as a garden, while the great bank that sheltered it formed a succession of terraces from which one caught glimpses of the rushing Muick between the birches that lined the banks of the impetuous little stream.

The house was a most unpretentious building, in the plainest style of Scotch country-house architecture, with rough cream-coloured walls, a tiled roof, small irregular windows, and a mean little porch. It was only saved from ugliness by a growth of ivy over the lower portion and by a freak of the designer, whereby one end was raised a story above the rest, and the roof of this portion made to slope north and south, instead of east and west, like that of the rest of the building. At the back the firs and larches rose to a great height, the house seeming to nestle under their protection whenever the winter storms burst over the bleak hills around.

Ferguson was glad to see me, and welcomed me back with a cordiality which made my mind easier

on the subject of the announcement I had to make to him. I went up to my room and, finding everything prepared for me, told him I was ready for dinner. Instead of going downstairs, he only said, "Yes, sir; it is coming up," and knelt down to pull off my boots.

"All right," said I; "I can do that. I'm very hungry."

"No doubt of it, sir," he answered, but did not stir. "The fact is, sir, that knowing you would come home hungry, and maybe very much fatigued, and that to be in the kitchen serving dinner and up here attending upon you at the same time is a moral impossibility, I made bold to ask an old and very respectable female that was staying in the village to give me a little help—just for this evening, sir. She is very clean in her ways, sir, and a most respectable and God-fearing body."

I jumped at the news, and congratulated him upon his forethought with great heartiness.

"I have no more objection to seeing a woman's face about the place than you have yourself, Ferguson," I said cordially; "in fact I have just given permission to two poor ladies to pass the winter in the cottage at the back, and I want you to help me to put the place straight a bit for them. They come in on Friday. I don't want the place to fall to pieces with dry rot for want of some one to live in it."

"Ladies won't keep the dry rot out of a place, sir," answered Ferguson, with dry contempt. "However, you know best, sir, what kind of cattle you like to harbour in your own barns, and I daresay they'll be snug enough till the snow comes."

This dark suggestion was but the echo to my own fears. I was so anxious to secure a co-operation in

my plan not merely perfunctory, but zealous, knowing well, as I did, the highly sensitive mood in which the elder at least of my new tenants would arrive, that even after this scantily-gracious speech I humbled myself more than was meet.

"By the bye, Ferguson," I began again after a short pause, during which he helped me on with my coat, "I'm thinking of having the little north room upstairs fitted up for you, as a sort of—sort of housekeeper's room, butler's room, you know." Mine was such a nondescript household that it was not easy to find a designation for any of the apartments, but I wished thus neatly to intimate that if my mayor of the palace had matrimonial intentions, his do-nothing king would not stand in his way. "Not that my household is becoming larger, I daresay you would like to have some place where you and Tim and Mrs. —Miss—what did you say her name was? could sit in the evenings."

"Neither Mrs. nor Miss anything did I say was her name," answered Ferguson, with grave deliberation. "Plain Janet, sir; she leaves titles to her betters. And the kitchen does very well for me, sir, and for Janet too if you care to engage her as housekeeper, after due trial of her capabilities."

"Oh, if she satisfies you she will satisfy me."

"None the less I should wish you to see her, that you may understand it was for your better service and not for my own pleasure that I introduced her here. I have no opinion of women, sir, until they are past the age for frivolity, and I'm not handsome enough to go courting myself."

Whether this was a warning to me not to be beguiled into a fatal trust in the power of my own beauty,

and an obscure hint that in his opinion I was in danger of making a fool of myself, Ferguson's face was too wooden to betray; but the manner in which he gave his services towards putting the cottage in order was unsatisfactory, not to say venomous. He veiled his displeasure with my new freak under an officious zeal for the comfort of the coming tenants, which was much harder to deal with than stubborn unwillingness to work for them would have been. My assurances that one was an invalid and the other a child only supplied him with fresh forms of indirect attack. He was surprised that I did not have one of the two rooms on the ground-floor fitted up as a bedroom, as invalids cannot walk up and down stairs; he was kind enough to place in one of the upper rooms, which he persisted in calling "the nursery," a small wooden horse of the primitive straight-legged kind, a penny rattle, and a soft fluffy parrot; and when I impatiently pitched the things out at the door he seemed dismayed, and said "he had thought they would please the wee bairn."

That old beast took all the pleasure out of the little excitement of furnishing. On the morning after my return, he took care to present to me the respectable Janet; he had, indeed, not overrated her magnificent lack of meretricious charms; for in the wooden face and hard blue eyes I recognised at once the features of my faithful attendant, additional wrinkles taking the place of the sabre-cut. She was his mother. As, however, neither made any reference to this fact, I treated it as a family secret and made no indiscreet inquiries.

The eventful Friday came. I was in the cottage as soon as it was light, making for the last time the

tour of the two bedrooms, kitchen, and sitting-room, trying all the windows to see that they were draught-tight, passing my hands along the walls in a futile attempt to find out if they were damp. In the sitting-room I stayed a long time, moving about the furniture, a second-hand suite, covered with dark red reps; I was disgusted with the mournful bareness of the apartment, and wondered how I could have been so stupid as to forget that women liked ornaments. I went back to my house and ransacked it furtively for nicknacks, without much success. First, I reviewed the pictures: a regular bachelor's collection they were, not objectionable from a man's point of view, but for ladies——. No, the pictures were hopeless, with the exception of huge engravings, "The Relief of Lucknow," and "Queen Philippa Begging the Lives of the Burgesses," which, though perfectly innocuous to a young girl's mind, were not exhilarating to anybody's. Besides, fancy being caught by Ferguson staggering under the burden of those ponderous works of art! I had not known before how meagre were the appointments of my home; my five years of wandering had given me a traveller's indifference to all but necessaries, so that, as I looked round the study, where I spent nearly all the time that I passed indoors, I saw little that could be spared. It was a comfortable-looking room enough, with its three big windows, two looking south over the terraced garden and the wooded valley of the Muick, the remaining one east over the lawn and the drive, and more trees. The west wall of the room was filled from floor to ceiling by book-shelves of the plainest kind; these were filled, not with the student's methodically-arranged collection of sombre and well-worn volumes,

not with the "gentleman's" suspiciously neat and bright "complete sets" in morocco and half-calf, which to remove seems as improper as to scrape off the wall-paper would be; but with the oddest of odd lots of literary ware, in a dozen languages, in all sizes and all varieties of binding and lack of binding, no two volumes of anything together, and not a book that I didn't love among them, from Montaigne, in her dear dirty paper covers, hanging by a thread, to Thackeray in a beastly *édition de luxe.*

On the north wall was a fireplace—wide, high, old-fashioned and warm—with a discoloured white marble mantelpiece, decorated with fat bewigged Georgian cupids. Above it hung an old cavalry sword with which my father had cut his way through the Russians at Inkermann. Close to the fireplace, and with its back to the book-shelves, stood my own especial chair—big, roomy, well worn—covered with dark red morocco, like the rest of the furniture. A reading-table stood in the corner beside it, and on the right hand was a bigger table, piled high with books and papers, cigars, bills and rubbish. There was a writing-table in one corner, at which I never wrote; a sofa covered with more literary lumber; two cabinets crammed with curiosities collected on my travels, tossed in with little attempt at arrangement; a card-table on which stood a quantity of old-fashioned silver, such as tall candlesticks, goblets, a punch-bowl and a massive last-century urn. A stuffed duck, a Dutch tankard, a pair of elk's horns, and a bust of Dante surmounted by a fox's brush, occupied the top of the book-shelves. A high plain fourfold screen, as dark as the rest of the time-worn furniture, hid the door; and close to the screen a

dog-kennel, with the front taken out and replaced by a strong iron grating, formed the winter home of a large brown monkey, which I had bought at a sale with the fascinating reputation of being dangerous, but which had belied its character by allowing me to bring it home on my shoulders. To-to, so called for no better reason than that my collie, whose favourite resting-place was now well-defined on the goatskin hearthrug, was named Ta-ta, had from our first introduction treated me with such marked tolerance that I, in my loneliness, had begun to feel a sort of superstitious fondness for the brute, and fancied I saw more reason and affection in his blinking brown eyes than in any of the Scotch pebbles which served as organs of visions to my Gaelic neighbours. When I first bought him it was mild enough for him to live in the yard; but when the weather grew cold, and he was brought into the kitchen, he got on so ill with the powers there that I had to take compassion upon him and them, and remove To-to to the study, where he justified his promotion by the reserve and gravity of his manners, his only marked foible being a furious jealousy of Ta-ta, whose resting-place was just beyond the utmost tether of the monkey's chain. Rarely did an evening pass without some skirmish between the two. Perhaps Ta-ta, seeing me smile over the book I was reading, and anxious to share my enjoyment, even if she could not understand the joke, would incautiously get up and wag her tail. Whereupon To-to would dash across the hearthrug and assist her, and much unpleasantness would follow, the dog barking, the monkey chattering, the master swearing —all three members of the menagerie trying to come

off conqueror in the *mêlée*. Or else To-to would fall from the top of his kennel to the floor, with a loud noise, and would lie stiff and still on the rug, as if in a fit; and then the simple Ta-ta would walk over to investigate the case, and the monkey would seize her ears and twist them round with jabbering triumph. I kept a small whip to separate the combatants on these occasions, but I only dared use it very sparingly; as, though its effect upon To-to's coarser nature was salutary in the extreme in reducing him to instant love and obedience, as the boot of the costermonger does his wife, the gentler Ta-ta would look up at me with such piteous protest in her dark eyes that I felt a brute for the next half hour.

From this room, the scene of most of my domestic life, I took a pair of silver candlesticks and a Dresden cup and saucer. Into the unused drawing-room, which I had had fitted up years ago in the Louis Quinze style, I just peeped; but there was nothing very tempting in white and gold curly-legged furniture tied up in brown holland on a cold polished floor, so I locked the door again, and carried away my prizes to the cottage, where they certainly improved the look of the sitting-room mantelpiece.

I had no sort of carriage more convenient than a Norfolk-cart, so on my way to Aberdeen I ordered a fly to be at Ballater Station on my return with my new tenants. Both the ladies were already dressed for their journey, and we started at once, Mrs. Ellmer hastening to inform me that she had sent most of her luggage to some friends in London, to account, I fancy, poor lady, for having only one shabby trunk and two stage baskets. Babiole sat very quietly during the railway journey, looking out of window at

the now dreary and bleak landscape; and I spoke so little that any one might have thought I would rather have been alone. But, indeed, I was only afraid, from the happy excitement which glowed in the faces of both talkative mother and silent daughter, lest their bright expectations should be disappointed by the simplicity and desolation of the place they persisted in regarding as a palace of delights.

"It's a very homely place, you know," I said solemnly, after being bantered in a sprightly manner by Mrs. Ellmer upon my artfulness in building myself a fortress up in the hills where, like the knights of old, I could indulge in what lawless pranks I pleased. "And I assure you that nothing could possibly be more simple than my mode of life there. Whatever of the bold bad bandit there may have been in my composition ten years back has been melted down into mere harmless eccentricity long ago."

"Ah! you are not going to make me believe that," said Mrs. Ellmer, with a giddy shake of the head. "Why, the very name Larkhall betrays you."

I believe the dear lady really did think the name had been given in commemoration of "high jinks" I had held there; but I hastened to assure her that "lark" was simply the Highland pronunciation of "larch," a tree which grew abundantly in the neighbourhood. However, she only smiled archly, and seeing that the imaginary iniquities she seemed bent on imputing to me in no way lessened her exuberant happiness in my society, I left my character in her hands, with only a glance at Babiole, who seemed, with her eyes fixed on the moving landscape, to be deaf to what went on inside the carriage. I was rather glad of it.

When we got to Ballater the little shed of a station was crowded by rough villagers, all eagerly enjoying the splendid excitement of the arrival of the train. A dense, wet Scotch mist enveloped us as we stepped on to the platform, chilled by our cold journey; still, they both smiled with persistent happiness, which grew rapturous when we all got into a roomy fly which Mrs. Ellmer called "your carriage." They were charmed with the village, which looked, through the veil of fine rain, a most depressing collection of stiff stone and slate dwellings to my *blasé* eyes. They were delighted with the cold and dreary drive. They pronounced the dark fir-forest through which we drove "magnificent"; and, finally, after a hushed and reverential silence as we went through the plantation, both were transfixed with admiration at the sight of my modest dwelling. Mrs. Ellmer even went so far as to admire the "fine rugged face" of Ferguson, who was standing at the hall door scowling his worst scowl. I did not risk an encounter with him, but led the ladies straight into the cottage, where a peat fire was glowing in each of the lower rooms. We went first into the sitting-room; a lighted lamp was in the middle of the table, the tea-things were at one end. I glanced from mother to daughter, trying to read their first impression of their new home. Mrs. Ellmer's eyes, sharpened by sordid experience to hungry keenness, took in every detail at once with critical satisfaction, while her lips poured forth commonplaces of vague delight. The climax of her pleasure was the discovery of the cup and saucer on the mantelpiece. By the way in which her thin face lighted up I saw she was a connoisseur. In looking at it she forgot me and for a moment paused in her enraptured monologue.

Babiole took it all differently. She seemed to hold her breath as she looked slowly round, as if determined to gaze on everything long enough to be sure that it was real ; then, with a little sob, she turned her head quickly, and her innocent eyes, soft and bright with unspeakable gratitude, fell on me.

You must have been for years an object of horror and loathing to your fellow-men to know what that look, going straight from soul to soul with no thought of the defects of the bodily envelope, was to me. Perhaps it was because my life had so long been barren of all pleasures dependent on my fellow-creatures that I could neither then, nor later that evening when I was alone, recall any sensation akin to its effect in sweetness or vividness except the glow I had felt after Babiole's girlish confidence to me at the door of the Aberdeen lodging. I suppose I must have stood smiling at the child with grotesque happiness, for Mrs. Ellmer, turning from contemplation of the cup and saucer, drew her thin lips together very sourly.

"And now I will leave you to your tea," said I hastily. "I told Janet to put everything ready for you."

"Thank you, Mr. Maude, you are too good. We require no waiting on, I assure you," broke in Mrs. Ellmer, with rather tart civility.

"Oh no, I only told her to put the kettle on in the kitchen," I protested humbly. And, with ceremonious hopes that they would be comfortable, I retreated, Babiole giving my fingers a warm-hearted squeeze when it came to her turn to shake hands. The child was following me to let me out when her mother interposed and came with me to the door herself.

She took my hand and held it while she assured me that she was so much overpowered by my distinguished kindness and courtesy that I must excuse her if, in the effort to express her feelings adequately, she found herself without words. I'm sure I wished she would, for she went on in the same strain, making convulsive little clutches at my fingers to emphasise her speech, until both she and I began to shiver. She did not let me go until Babiole appeared behind her, flushed and smiling, in the little passage. Then Mrs. Ellmer's fingers sprang up from mine like an opened latch and, dismissed, I raised my hat and hurried off.

I had not gone half-a-dozen yards when I met Janet on her way to the cottage; she curtseyed and told me, in answer to my question, that she was taking some tea to the ladies. After a moment's hesitation I turned and followed her, proposing to ask them whether they would like some books.

Janet opened the door quietly without knocking, and went into the kitchen on the left, while I stood on the rough fibre mat outside the sitting-room, having grown suddenly shy about intruding again. I heard Babiole's clear childish voice.

"Oh, mamma, if only papa doesn't find us out, how happy we shall be here! Mr. Maude is a good man, I am sure of it!"

"As good as the rest of them, I daresay," answered her mother in tones of pure vinegar. "Understand, if you ever meet him when I'm not with you, you are not to speak to him. It makes me ill to look at his hideous wicked face. There's someone in the kitchen, run and see who it is."

And the poor Beast, thinking he had heard enough,

and afraid lest Beauty should catch him eavesdropping, slunk away from the door-mat and made his way home with his tail between his legs.

CHAPTER VII.

THOSE unlucky few words that I had overheard created a great breach between me and my tenants, and, moreover, brought on in the would-be philosopher a fit of misanthropic melancholy I could not get over the poor little woman's cynical hypocrisy for some days, during which I never went near the cottage; and if I met either mother or daughter in my walks or rides, I contented myself with raising my hat ceremoniously, and giving them as brief a glimpse of my "wicked hideous face" as possible. Ha! ha! I would show them whether or not I was dependent on their society, and how much of selfish libertinism there had been in my wish to house them comfortably for the winter; a pair of idiots!

But this noble pride wore itself out in a fortnight, at the end of which time I began to think it was I who was the idiot, to nourish resentment against a pair of helpless creatures who, too poor to refuse an offer which saved them from brutality and starvation, had seen enough of the dark side of human nature to put small faith in disinterested motives, and had no weapon but their own wits wherewith to fight their natural enemy—man. Besides, my solitude had grown ten times more solitary now that, sitting alone in my study at night, with To-to languidly stretching himself on the kennel in front of me, paying no attention to me whatever, and Ta-ta, who really had

capacities for sympathy, lying asleep on the rug at my feet, I knew that, not a hundred yards away, there were slender women's forms flitting about, and girlish prattle going on, by a little modest fireside that was a home.

So I suddenly remembered that I ought to call and ask them if they found their new home to their liking. Anxious, for the first time for five years, to make the best of a bad business, so far as my person was concerned, I exchanged the coarse tweed Norfolk suit I usually wore for a black coat and gray trousers I used to wear in town, which, though doubtless a little old-fashioned in cut, might reasonably be supposed to pass muster in the wilds, and even to give me a rather dashing appearance. But, alas! It did not. It showed me, on the contrary, how far I had slipped away from civilisation. My hair was too long, what complexion I had left too weather-beaten, while the seamed and scarred right side of my face looked more hideous than ever. I changed back quickly to my usual coat, scarcely acknowledging to myself that some sort of vague wish to live once more the life of other men was disappointed.

I found Mrs. Ellmer and her daughter in their outdoor dress; they had been driven in by a snow shower, one of the first of the season. The sitting-room looked now cosy and habitable, if a little untidy the habits of the touring actress being still manifest in a collection of unframed cabinet photographs—not all uncalculated to bring a blush to the Presbyterian cheek—which stood in a row on the mantelpiece. It occurred to me that old Janet might have let out the fact that I turned back with her to the cottage, and, perhaps, overheard something to my disadvantage,

for Babiole looked frightened and shy, and Mrs. Ellmer's manner was almost apologetically humble. There was constraint enough upon us all for me to make my visit very short, but as I left I formally invited them to dine with me on the following evening.

With what shamefaced *nonchalence* I told Ferguson that day to have the drawing-room opened and cleaned on the following morning! With what stolid lowering resignation he extracted my reason for this unparalleled order! However, he made no protest. But next morning, while I was at breakfast, he entered the room in his usual clockwork manner, but with a glow of pleasurable feeling in his cold eyes.

"If you please, sir, Janet would be obliged if you would step into the drawing-room and see if you still wish to have it prepared for the party this evening."

Party! I could have broken his neck. But I only followed him in an easy manner into the hall. It was full of blinding smoke, which was pouring forth from the open door of the drawing-room. I dashed heroically into the apartment, only to be met with a denser cloud, which rushed into my mouth and made my eyes smart and burn. Some winged thing, either a bird or a bat, flapped against the walls and ceiling in the gloom. Janet was choking at the fireplace, in great danger of being smothered.

"What is all this?" I choked angrily, getting back into the hall.

"Nothing, sir," answered Ferguson, with grim delight. "Nothing but that Janet lit the fire to air the room in obedience to your orders, and that the chimney smokes a little. Would you still wish to have the room got ready, sir?"

But he had gone too far; he had roused the lion.

"Come in here," I said, in a tone which subdued his happiness; and he followed me back into the room. "Now t-t-take the tongs," I continued, as haughtily as coughing would permit, "and r-ram it up the chimney."

Cowed, but exceedingly reluctant, he obeyed, and I would not let him relax his efforts, until, smothered with soot and dust, dry twigs and blackened snow, he pulled down on himself a sack, a couple of birds'-nests, and other obstacles which, some from above and some from below, had been deposited in the unused chimney.

"Now," said I, purple in the face but content, "you can relight the fire."

And, satisfied with this moral victory and the prestige it gave me in the eyes of the whole household—for Tim and the out-door genius who gardened twelve acres and looked after four horses had both enjoyed this domestic scandal from the doorway—I marched back to my cold coffee and congealed bacon.

There were no more difficulties, though, at least none worth mentioning. It is true that on returning from my morning's ride I found the hall so stuffed up with furniture that I had to enter my residence through one of the study windows, five feet from the ground; and that I had to picnic on a sandwich in the study instead of lunching decorously in the dining-room; but these discomforts might be necessary to a thorough cleaning, and could be borne with fortitude. At six o'clock my guests arrived, and, having left their cloaks in a spare-room opened for the occasion, they were led to shiver in the drawing-room, which still smelt of smoke and soap and water.

Mrs. Ellmer, with chattering teeth, admired the painted ceiling, the white satin chairs bright with embossed roses, the pale screen, and all the fanciful glories of the room, the magnificence of which evidently delighted her. Babiole seemed unable to take her eyes off two oil-paintings, both portraits of the same lady, which, in massive gilt oval frames, occupied a prominent position at the end of the room opposite the fireplace.

"Babiole is fascinated, you see, Mr. Maude," said her mother, with the little affected laugh which gave less the idea of pleasure than that of a wish to please "If she dared she would ask who those ladies are."

"They are both the same, mother," said Babiole, so softly, so shyly, that one could think she guessed there was some story about the portraits.

Mrs. Ellmer's eyes began to beam with a less artless curiosity.

"Would it be indiscreet to ask her name?"

"Her name was Helen."

"Ah, poor lady! She is dead, then?"

"No, I believe she is alive."

Babiole glanced quickly from the pictures to my face and pressed her mother's hand, as that lady was about to burst forth into more questions. I don't know that my countenance expressed much, for my feelings on the subject of the original of the portrait had long ceased to be keen; but I think the little one, being very young, liked to make as much as possible out of any suggestion of a romance. I took the girl by the arm and led her to the end of the room, where the portraits hung.

"Now," said I, "which of these two pictures do you like best?"

Babiole instantly assumed the enormous seriousness of a child who is honoured with a genuine appeal to its taste. After a few moments' grave comparison of the pictures, she turned to me, with the face of a fairy judge, and asked solemnly:

"Do you mean which should I love best, or which do I admire most as a work of art?"

This altogether unexpected question, which came so quaintly from the childish lips, made me laugh. Babiole turned from me to the pictures, rather disconcerted, and Mrs. Ellmer broke in with her sharp high voice:

"Babiole understands pictures; she has had a thorough art education from her father, Mr. Maude."

"Oh yes," said I, wondering vaguely why mothers always show up so badly beside their daughters. Then I turned again to the girl. "I didn't know how clever you were, Miss Babiole. Supposing I had two friends, one who had known this lady and loved her, and the other who was a great art collector. Which portrait would each like best?"

Babiole decided without hesitation. "The art collector would like this one, and the one who had loved her would like that," she said, indicating each with the glance of her eyes.

"But the art collector's is the prettier face of the two," I objected.

"Yes; but it isn't so good."

I was astonished and fascinated by the quickness of the girl's perception.

"You ought to grow into an artist," I said, smiling. "The pretty one was in the Academy this year, painted by a famous artist. I heard it was a wonderful portrait, and I commissioned a man to buy it for

me. The other is an enlargement, by an unknown artist, from half-a-dozen old photographs and sketches, of the same lady five years ago."

"And it is exactly like her—like what she was, I mean?"

"No; she was prettier, but not so—good."

I used the word "good" because she had used it, though it was not the word I should have chosen. I wanted her to say something more, for she was still looking at the pictures in a very thoughtful way; but at that moment Mrs. Ellmer, skipping lightly along the polished floor in a way that made me tremble for her balance, thrust her head between us and laid her pointed chin on her daughter's shoulder.

"And what are you two so deeply interested about?" she asked playfully.

Babiole put her tender little cheek lovingly against her mother's thin face, and I began talking about art in a vague and ignorant manner, which incautiously showed that I disliked the interruption. Ferguson came to my rescue with the solemn announcement of dinner.

From Mrs. Ellmer's rather critical attitude towards the different dishes, I gathered that she prided herself on her cookery, and Babiole ingenuously let out that mamma had once superintended a very grand dinner of some friends of theirs—"Oh, such rich people!"—and it had been a great success. Mamma seemed a little uneasy at this indiscretion, but hastened to add that they were such dear friends of hers that when they were left in a difficulty by the sudden illness of their man-cook—a man who had been in the first families, and had come to them from

Lord Stonehaven's—she had overwhelmed them by the offer of her services.

"I think all ladies should learn cooking, Mr. Maude; and, indeed, many do now. The lessons are very expensive, certainly; but one never regrets either the time or the money when it is once learned," said she. "Servants never understand how things ought to be done unless there is some one able to give them a little guidance."

To all this conversation Ferguson listened with the amiability of an enraged bear restrained by iron bars from making a meal of his tormentors.

Babiole had little attention to spare for any one but Ta-ta, with whom she had struck up a rapidly ripening friendship.

"Ta-ta has taken a fancy to you," I said, smiling. "She always likes the people I like," I added, with the common fatuity of owners of pet animals.

Upon this Mrs. Ellmer piped out "Ta-ta, Ta-ta, Ta-ta!" until, to stop her, I beckoned the dog to her side of the table. But the collie, seeing that she had nothing better than a raisin to offer, merely sniffed at it, avoided the threatened caress, and slunk back to her old place by Babiole, in whose lap she rested her head contentedly.

While her mother was still laughing shrilly at this misadventure, the child asked if they might see my monkey.

"Shall I take you to my study now," said I, "and show you how an old batchelor passes his evenings?"

"Is the monkey fond of you too, Mr. Maude?" asked Babiole, as I opened the door for them.

"I flatter myself that he is. At least I can boast that he flies at any one whom he suspects of

doing me harm. Two months ago a doctor was attending me for a swelling on my neck. He came day after day, and To-to treated him with all the courtesy due to an honoured guest, until he decided one day that the swelling ought to be lanced, and took from his pockets a case of instruments. He had scarcely opened it when To-to, chattering and grimacing, sprang across the hearthrug with such violence that he broke his chain, and fastened his teeth in the doctor's hand."

"What a savage brute!" exclaimed Mrs. Ellmer.

Babiole thought it out as we crossed the hall, and then spoke gravely:

"But the monkey was wrong, for the doctor never meant to hurt you," she said, in her deliberate way.

"I suppose you gave him a good beating," said Mrs. Ellmer.

"No, I didn't. I scolded him till we were alone together, for the sake of the doctor's feelings. But when he was gone I sneaked up to To-to's kennel and stroked him and gave him a beautiful bone. The scolding was for the mistake, you know, and the bone for the devotion."

We entered the study, Mrs. Ellmer first, I last. The alarmed lady, on coming round the screen, was close to the monkey before she saw him. To-to only blinked up at her composedly, with no demonstration of hostility; but to my horror and amazement, no sooner did he catch sight of Babiole, who came up to him bravely by my side, with her little hand cordially outstretched towards him, than he made a savage spring at her, his teeth and eyes gleaming with malice. I was just in time to draw her back in my arms, so that he fell to the ground instead of fastening on her poor

little wrist. Mrs. Ellmer screamed, Ta-ta began to bark and make judiciously-distanced rushes at the monkey; while Babiole recovered herself, very pale, but quite quiet, and I, strangely excited, gave To-to a sharp blow.

"Oh, don't!" cried the child; but then, smiling archly, though the colour driven away by the little fright had not yet come back to her cheek, she added, "but you will give him a bone as a reward when we are gone."

"Do you think so?" said I, in a rather constrained voice. Then, seeing that Mrs. Ellmer's eyes were fixed curiously upon me, I added, "The first mistake, you see, was excusable; there was a reason for it. But this attack was unprovoked."

"Yes," said Babiole naïvely; "for how could I do you any harm?"

"Yes, how indeed?" said I.

But even as I said this, and looked at her blue-eyed face, I thought that perhaps the monkey might prove to be wiser than either of us, unless I grew wiser as she grew older.

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly enough in the ransacking of my cabinets of curiosities; Mrs. Ellmer, who proved to be a connoisseur of more things than china, took delight in the value of the treasures themselves, while Babiole pleased herself with such as she thought beautiful, and enjoyed particularly the stories I told about the places I had found them in, and the ways in which I had picked them up. She grew radiant over the present of a Venetian bead necklace, such as can be bought in the Burlington Arcade for a few shillings; but when I told her it was a souvenir from a woman whose child

I had saved from drowning, her joy in her new treasure was suddenly turned to reverence. How did I do it? It was a very simple story; a little boy of four or five had slipped into one of the canals, and I, passing in a gondola, had caught his clothes, or rather his rags, and handed the choking, squalling manikin back into the custody of a black-eyed, brown-skinned woman, who had insisted, with impulsive but coquettish gratitude, on presenting me with the beads she wore round her own neck.

"Wasn't she in rags, too, then?" asked Babiole.

"Oh no, she was rather picturesquely got up."

"Then, I should think, she was not his mother at all."

"Perhaps not. But all mothers are not like yours."

"I *know* that," cooed the girl, tucking her hand lovingly under the maternal arm. Then, after a pause, she said, "What a lot of nice places and people you must have seen in all the years you have travelled about, Mr. Maude."

"How old do you think I am, then?" I asked, struck by something in her tone.

She hesitated, looking shyly from me to her mother.

"No, no," said I. "Tell me what you think yourself."

She glanced at me again, then suggested in a small voice, "sixty?"

Both Mrs. Ellmer and I began to laugh; and the child, blushing, rubbed her cheek against her mother's sleeve.

"How much would you take off from that, Mrs. Ellmer?"

"Why, I'm sure you can't be a day more than forty-five."

She evidently thought I should be pleased by this, the good lady flattering herself that she had taken off at least five years. My first impulse was to set them right rather indignantly, but the next moment I remembered that I should gain nothing but a character for mendacity by telling them that I should not be thirty till next year. So I only laughed again, and then Babiole's voice broke in apologetically.

"I only guessed what I did, Mr. Maude, because you are so very kind; you seem always trying to do good to some one."

"Here's a subtle and cynical little observer for you," said I, glancing over the child's head at the mother. "She knows, you see, that benevolence is the last of the emotions, and is only tried as a last resource when we have used up all the others."

Babiole looked much astonished at this interpretation, which she understood very imperfectly, and Mrs. Ellmer shook her head in arch rebuke as she rose to go. They went upstairs together to put on their cloaks, but Babiole came flying down before her mother to have a last peep at the portraits which had fascinated her. I followed her into the drawing-room, where lamp and fire were still burning, and she started and turned as she saw my reflection in the long glass which hung between the pictures.

"Well, are you as happy at the cottage as you thought you would be?" I asked.

"Oh, happier, a thousand times. It is too good to last," with a frightened sigh.

"Don't you miss the constant change of your travelling life, and the excitement of acting?"

She seemed scarcely to understand me at first, as she repeated in a bewildered manner, "excitement!" Then she said simply, "It's very exciting when you miss the train and the company go on without you; but it's dreadful, too, because the manager might telegraph to say you needn't come on at all."

"But the acting; isn't that exciting?"

"It's nice, sometimes, when one has a part one likes; but, of course, I only got small parts, and it's dreadful to have to go on with nothing to say, or for an executioner, or an old woman, with just a line."

"And don't you like travelling?"

"I like it sometimes in the summer; but in the winter it's too cold, and the places all seem alike; and then the pantomime season comes, and you have nothing to do."

"What do you do then? What did you do last winter, for instance?"

"We went back to London."

"Well?"

But Babiole had grown suddenly shy.

"Won't you tell me? Would you rather not?"

"I would rather not."

At that moment Mrs. Ellmer's voice was heard calling, in sharp tones, for "Babiole!"

"Here we are, Mrs. Ellmer, taking a last look at the pictures," I called back, and I led the child out into the hall, where her mother gave a sharp glance from her to me, and wished me good-night rather curtly. I stood at the door to watch them on their way to the cottage, as they would not accept my escort; and through the keen air I distinctly heard this question and answer:

"You want to get us turned out, to spend another winter like the last, I suppose. What did you tell him about your father?"

"Nothing, mother, nothing, indeed!——"

The rest of the child's passionate answer I could not catch, as they went farther away. But I wondered what the secret was that I had been so near learning.

CHAPTER VIII

I ENJOYED that evening so much that I was quite ready to go through another preparatory penance of smoking chimneys and general topsyturveydom to have another like it. But Fate and Ferguson ruled otherwise. I mentioned to him one day that I proposed inviting the ladies again for the following evening, and he said nothing; but when I made a state call on Mrs. Ellmer that afternoon, she brought forward all sorts of unexpected excuses to avoid the visit. Circumstances had made me too diffident to press the point, and I had to conclude, with much mortification, that the sight of my ugly face for a whole evening had been too distressing to their artistic eyes for them to undergo such a trial again. They, however, invited me to dine with them on Christmas day, but I was too much hurt to accept the invitation. It was not until long afterwards I found out that, on learning my intention of giving another "party," my faithful Ferguson had posted off to the cottage and informed Mrs. Ellmer that his poor mother was so ill she could scarcely keep on her legs, and now master had ordered another "turn out," and he expected it

would "do for her" altogether. I only knew, then, that when I told him there was to be no "party," his wooden face relaxed into a faint but happy smile, and that my feet ached to kick him.

That winter was what we called mild up there, and it passed most uneventfully for my tenants and for me. We saw very little of each other since that chill to our friendship; but I soon began to find that the little pale woman, who was too acid to excite as much liking as she did pity and respect, had no idea of allowing the obligations between us to lie all on one side. Under the masculine *régime* which had flourished in my household before the irruption of Mrs. Ellmer, her daughter and Janet, the art of mending had been unknown and ignored, and the science of cleaning my study had been neglected. With regard to my own raiment, the Brass Age, or age of pins, succeeded the Bone Age, or age of buttons, with unfailing regularity; and when, with Janet, the Steel Age, or age of needles came in, I sometimes thought I should prefer to go back to primitive barbarism and holes in my stockings rather than hobble about with large lumps of worsted thread at the corners of my toes—which was the best result of a process which the old lady called "darning."

The road to Ballater was for weeks impassable with snowdrifts; no possibility of replenishing one's wardrobe even from the village's meagre resources. At last, being by this time lamer than any pilgrim, I boldly cut out the lumps in my stockings, and thereby enlarged the holes. This flying in the face of Providence must have been an awful shock to Janet, for she related it to Mrs. Ellmer with some acrimony; the result of this was that the active little woman

overhauled my wardrobe, and everything else in my house that was in need of repair by the needle; she tried her hand successfully at some amateur tailoring; she hunted out some old curtains, and by a series of wonderful processes, which she assured me were very simple, transferred them from crumpled rags into very handsome tapestry hangings for a draughty corner of my study; she carried off my old silver, piece by piece, and polished it up until, instead of wearing the mouldy rusty hue of long neglect, it brightened the whole room with its glistening whiteness. I believe this last work was a sacred pleasure to her; Babiole said her mother cooed over the tankards and embraced the punch-bowl. The way that woman made old things look like new savoured of sorcery to the obtuse male mind. Ferguson would take each transfigured article, neatly patched tablecloth, worn skin rug, combed and cleaned to look like new, or whatever it might be, and hold it at arm's length, squinting horribly the while, and then, with a sigh of dismay at the disappearance of the old familiar rents, cast it from him in disgust. The climax of his rage was reached when, one evening at dinner, surprised by an unusually savoury dish, I sent a message of congratulation to Janet. Like a Northern Mephistopheles, his eyes flashed fire.

"I didna know, sir, ye were so partial to kickshaws," he said haughtily, with the strong Scotch accent into which, on his return to his native hills, he had allowed himself to relapse.

I saw that I had made some fearful blunder, and said no more; but I afterwards learned from Babiole, as a great secret, that her mother had prevailed upon Janet to yield up her daily duties as cook as far as my dinner was concerned; and my heart began to

melt and soften as the winter wore on, towards the strictly anonymous little chef who had delivered me from the binding tyranny of haggis and cock-a-leekie.

When the snow melted away from all but the tops of the hills and there came fresh little sprouts of pale green among the dark feather foliage of the larches, a change came over the tiny household of my tenants. From early morning until the sun began to sink low behind the hills Babiole was never to be found at the cottage. Sometimes, indeed, she would dash in at midday to dinner, as fresh and sweet as an opening rose; but more often she would stay away until evening began to creep on, taking with her a most frugal meal of a couple of sandwiches and a piece of shortbread. Even that was shared with Ta-ta, whom I encouraged to attend the venturesome little maiden on her long rambles; the dog would follow her now as willingly as he did me, and could be fierce enough upon occasion to prove a far from despicable body-guard; while I generally contrived to be about the grounds somewhere when she started, and, having noted the direction she took, I went that way for my morning ride. Often I passed them on the road, the girl walking at a sort of dance, the dog leaping and springing about her. At sight of me, Ta-ta would rush to her master, barking with joy; then, seeing that I would not take the only sensible course of allowing her to follow both her favourites together, she would run from the one to the other, in delirious perplexed excitement, until by a few words and gestures I let her know that her duty was with the beauty and not the beast.

Sometimes I would see the two climbing up a hill together, the collie not more sure-footed than the

child. Sometimes as I passed there would be a great waving of handkerchief and wagging of tail from some high cairn, to show me triumphantly how much more they dared than I, trotting on composedly some hundreds of feet below. I was always rather uneasy for the child, wandering to these lonely heights, and along such unfrequented roads without any companion but the dog; but her mother, with the odd inconsistency which breaks out in the best of us, could fear no danger to the girl from coarse peasant or steep cliff, while against the wiles of the well-dressed she put her strictly on her guard. As for the child herself, I could only tell her to be careful of her footing on rugged Craigendarroch, the nearest, the prettiest, the most dangerous of our higher hills; to tell her not to wander whithersoever her fancy led her would have been like warning a star not to mount so high in the sky.

Then as evening fell and I began, like any old woman, to grow anxious, I would hear Ta-ta's tired step in the hall outside my study, and a scratching at my door which gave place to a piteous sniffing and whining if I did not immediately rise to let her in. Then with a gentle wag of the tail she would trot up to the hearthrug and lie down, giving a sideways glance at To-to, who would hop down from his perch and make a grab at her tail to punish her for gadding about, and, finding that appendage out of reach, would sneak quietly back again and resume his hunt for the flea who would never be caught, to try to persuade us that his fruitless attempt had been a mere inadvertency. How hard Ta-ta would try, when a nice plate of gristle and potato at dinner time had revived her flagging energies, to describe to

me the events of the morning's walk! And how the sound of a bright childish laugh from the kitchen would stimulate her remembrance of the jolly run up-hill! I knew, though I said nothing, that Babiole used to come across to find her mother, busy with my dinner; and I could guess, from the altercations I often heard, that the hungry girl stole her share, and laughed at any one who said her nay. The dining-room always grew too hot when that bright laughter penetrated to my ears, and I would say carelessly to Ferguson:

"You can leave the door open."

He knew, you may be sure, why I liked to sit in a draught while March winds were about; but the stern Scot, however much he might still cherish enmity against the diabolical cleverness of the mother, had had a corner of his stony heart pulverised by the blooming child.

And so the cold spring passed into cool summer, and I began to notice, little as I saw of her, a change in the pretty maiden. As the season advanced, her vivacity seemed to subside a little, her dancing walk to give place to a more sedate step, while her rambles were often now limited to a climb up Craigendarroch, which formerly would have been a mere incident in the day's proceedings. I remarked upon this to Mrs. Ellmer; for she and I had now, in our loneliness, become great chums.

"Oh, don't you know?" said she, with her grating little laugh, "Babiole's in love!"

"In love!" said I slowly. "A child like that!"

"Oh, it's not a first attachment by any means," said she, making merry over my surprise, as she swung her little watering-pot with one hand, and put her head

on one side to admire a row of handsome gladioluses which she had reared with some care. "Her first, what you may call serious passion, was at seven years old, two whole years later than my earliest love. By the bye, Mr. Maude, I really must beg you to let me make some cuttings from your rose-trees; I have two excellent briars here, and I flatter myself I can graft as well as any gardener."

"You can do everything, Mrs. Ellmer," said I gravely, with honest gratitude and admiration. "You can make cuttings from every tree in the garden, if you please, and they will all hold their heads the higher for it."

The poor lady liked a little bit of simple flattery, and indeed it by no means now seemed out of place. The Highland air had brought the pink colour back to her wan face, and brightened her eyes, so that one now noticed with admiration the extreme delicacy of her features; while the rest and the relief from worry had softened both her careworn expression and the haggard outline of her face. She now, with coquettish sprightliness, tapped my shoulder and shook her head to show me that she had no faith in my blandishments.

"Don't talk to me," she said, but with a smile which contradicted the prohibition; "I'm too old for compliments, a woman with a grown-up daughter!"

Now I was quite glad to go back to the subject suggested by her last words.

"Who is the happy object of the young lady's preference?" I asked, trying to speak in a tone of badinage, though indeed I thought Babiole much too young and too pretty to bestow even the most make-believe affection on any one north o' Tweed, or south of it either, for that matter.

"It's one of the young Duncans, at Fir Lodge; the pretty-looking lad with the curly fair hair."

I gave a little "hoch" of disgust. A great freckle-faced lout of a boy—I knew him! I remembered, too, that the Duncans had joined heartily in a scandalised murmur, far-off sounds of which had reached my ears, at the enormity of my bringing play-acting folk to my Highland seraglio. With very few more words I left Mrs. Ellmer, more put out than I cared to show. However, after looking angrily at the rhododendrons in the drive for a little while, I happily remembered that the annual visit of my four oddly-assorted friends was due within a month, and that then I should have something more interesting to occupy my mind than the flirtations of a couple of children. "And after that," I said to myself, "I think I shall set off on my wanderings again for a little while, and the Ellmers can remain here until they, too, are tired of it, and so we shall avoid any wrench over the break-up." That the break-up must come I knew, and, on the whole, I felt that it had better come early than late—for me at any rate.

I climbed up Craigendarrock next day, and every day for a week after; I never met any one, and every time I was alarmed by the steepness of those rocks to the south, where a poor young fellow who was out fern-hunting fell down the perpendicular cliff one summer's day, and was found a shapeless, lifeless heap four days after on the side of the hill. He was a stranger, and might have lain there till his bones whitened on the rocks and ferns among the young oak-trees, if a couple of Ballater lads had not stumbled upon his body in their Sunday walk, and called out all the village to see the sight. And these

made the most of the excitement in a singular way, holding a highly decorous and Presbyterian wake, settling themselves in a business-like manner like a flock of crows on the broken ground around the stone on which the dead man, scarcely more silent and unconcerned than they, held his mournful levee. This incident had already given a tragic interest to the south side of the pretty hill; and although Babiole knew the place well, and was as sure-footed and nimble as one of its native squirrels, I felt anxious every day when there was no answer to call of "Ta-ta! Ta-ta!" and was not satisfied until I had made the circuit of the hill, pushed my way through the barriers of uprooted firs with which the gales of early spring had encumbered the hillside on the north, and going on in that direction, came to the bare and almost precipitous slope which forms the southern wall of the Pass of Ballater.

On my eighth visit I heard a faint bark from the ridge of hill to the north-west of the pass; considering this as a clue, I made my way down Craigendarroch, across the meadows round Mona House, a white building of simplest architecture, flanked by a garden where straight rows of bright flowers looked quaintly picturesque against a dark background of fir and hill. Crossing the road which ran at the foot of the ridge, I began to climb. A rough steep path had here been worn among the bracken, and was widened at every ascent by falls of loose soil and stones. I knew what a pretty little nook there was at the top, just the place where a lovelorn maid would delight to make a nest. The path grew steeper than ever towards the top, and led suddenly to a grassy hollow, one wall of which was a perpendicular grey

cliff, broken by narrow and inaccessible ridges on which slender little birch-trees contrived to grow. On the opposite side the mossy ground sloped gently, and the wild rabbits scurried about among the stumps of fallen pines.

I had only gone a few steps along the soft ground when I caught the sound of a light girlish voice; it came from the miniature chasm at the foot of the cliff. I wondered who the child was talking to. But as I came nearer, hearing no voice but hers, I supposed she must be reading aloud.

"Oh no, Roderick," at last I was close enough to hear, "I love you passionately, with the love one knows but once. But it is impossible for me to do as you wish. You speak to me of your father; you urge upon me that he would forgive my lowly birth, that he would welcome to his ancestral halls the woman of your choice, whoever she might be. But do not forget that I too have pride, that I too have a duty to perform to my parents." Then came a change of tone, and a sort of practical parenthesis, hurried through quickly like a stage direction: "I don't mean my father of course, because he was so clever that he had to think of his art and wasn't like a father at all." Then her tone became sentimental again: "But my mother—mamma is worthy to have all the wealth of kings showered at her feet. She is beautiful, and clever, and good; Mr. Maude—indeed everybody, admires and loves her. No, Roderick, I will not allow my mother to become a mere mother-in-law"

The bathos of the conclusion upset my gravity; I came close to the edge of the pit and looked down. The little maid was not reading, but was sitting by herself on a tree-trunk among the stones, with the

dog asleep on the edge of her frock, living in a world of her own, and holding converse with the people there. I crept away as quietly as I could and went back home in an amused but rapturous state: the next time I saw my goddess, though, she was devouring slice after slice of bread and jam with prosaic ravenousness at the kitchen door.

And I concluded that at fourteen, even with a face like a flower and a voice like a bird's, "the love one knows but once" and perfect peace of mind are not incompatible things.

CHAPTER IX.

IT was Fabian Scott who, being by his profession less of a free agent than any other member of my little circle of friends, fixed the date of their yearly visit. As soon as he made known to me the first day when he would be free, I summoned the rest, and not one of them had ever yet failed me. Fabian wrote to me this year, giving the fifteenth of August as the day on which the closing of the theatre at which he was playing would leave him free.

The news of the expected arrivals quickly reached the ears of Mrs. Ellmer, who came skipping along the garden towards me one morning about a week before the visit, and attacked me at once with much vivacity.

"Aha!" she began, "and so we were to be left in ignorance of the gay doings, were we?"

"If you allude to the meeting of half a dozen old fogeys on the fifteenth, Mrs. Ellmer, I assure you I was coming to the cottage to tell you about it. But

we shall be about as sportive as a gathering of the British Archæological Association, and as we shall be out on the moors all day, I am afraid you won't find the place much livelier than usual. I think," I added, coming to the pith of the matter with some feeling of awkwardness, "that you had better keep Miss Babiole more—more with you, while—while the gentlemen are here. Or—or if you would like a trip to the seaside we might see about a couple of weeks at Muchalls or Stonehaven, and that would give us an opportunity of—of having the cottage whitewashed, you know," I finished up, with a sudden gleam of tardy inventive genius.

The fact was, I had begun to tingle at the thought of the merciless "chaff"—as much worse to bear than slander as the stigma of fool is than that of rogue—which the importation of my fair tenants would bring down upon me. Besides, though my four visitors were all old friends, and very good fellows, yet a pretty face may work such Circe-like wonders, even in the best of us, that I thought it better that our bachelor loneliness should be, as before, untempered by the smiles of any woman lovelier than Janet. But Mrs. Ellmer, at my hesitating suggestion, grew rigid and haughty.

"Of course, Mr. Maude," she said, "if you wish now to make use of the cottage my daughter and I have done our best to keep in order for you, we shall be ready to pack up at any time. We can go to-morrow, if you like. I have no doubt that I shall be able to find an opening for the autumn season with some company."

"No, no, no!" interrupted I emphatically and with some impatience, "Pray do not think of such a

thing. There is plenty of room in my own place for all my friends. My sole object in making the suggestion I did was to prevent your being pestered with the attentions of a lot of rough sportsmen, who, when they were tired of shooting, would find nothing better to do than to worry you and Miss Babiole to death. And you remember," I ended, as a happy thought, "how, when you came here, you insisted on privacy."

"One may have too much even of such a good thing as one's own society," said she, with an affected little laugh. "I think I could bear a little attention now, with much equanimity, even from a sportsman who 'could find nothing better to do.' Of course, I could expect no more than that from gentlemen of such rank as your guests," she added, rather venomously. "But for a change even that might be acceptable."

Good heavens! The woman would not understand me.

"But Babiole!" I suggested quietly.

"Babiole is only a child; but even if she were not, a daughter of mine would be perfectly able to take care of herself, Mr. Maude."

After this snub, I could only bow and take myself off, spending the interval before my guests' arrival in schooling myself for the approaching ordeal.

The first to arrive on the fifteenth were Lord Edgar Normanton and Mr. Richard Fussell, the latter, anxious to make the most of his annual taste of rank and fashion, having lain in wait for the former at King's Cross, and insisted on bearing him company during the entire journey. I met them at Ballater station at 2.15 in the afternoon, and was sorry to hear

from Edgar, who never looked otherwise than the picture of robust health, and who was, moreover, getting fat, that he was far from well.

"I tell his lordship that he should take rowing exercise. Nothing like a good pull every day on the river to keep a man in condition," urged Mr. Fussell, who was fifty inches round what had once been his waist, and who seemed to radiate health and happiness.

They informed me that Fabian Scott had also travelled up by the night mail, but in another compartment; so I went to meet the train, which came into Ballater at 5.50, and found both Fabian and Mr. Maurice Browne disputing so violently that they had forgotten to get out. Fabian had indeed taken advantage of the stopping of the train to stride up and down the confined area of the railway carriage, gesticulating violently with his hatbox, rug, gun, and various other unconsidered trifles. I guessed that they could only have travelled together from Aberdeen, for there had been no bloodshed. They had been having a little discussion on realism in art, of which Maurice Browne was an ardent disciple. They were still hard at it, in terms unfit for publication, when I mounted the step and put my head in at the window. Excitable Fabian, with his keen eyes st ll flashing indignation with "exotic filth," shook my hand till he brought on partial paralysis of that member, while he fired a last shot into his less erratic opponent.

"No, sir," he protested vehemently, "I deny neither your ability nor your good faith, nor those of your French master; but I have the same objection to the fictions of your school, as works of art, as I should

have to the performance of a play written by cripples for cripples. It would be a curiosity, sir, and might attract crowds of morbid-minded people, besides cripples; and it would be none the less a disgusting and degraded exhibition, antagonistic to nature and truth, to which the feeblest 'virtue victorious and vice vanquished' melodrama would be as day unto night. With minds attuned to low thoughts, you seek for low things, and degrade them still further by your treatment. You have a philosophy, I admit, sir, but it is the philosophy of the hog."

And, having poured out this persuasive little harangue with such volubility that not even an Irishman could get in a word edgeways, Fabian allowed himself to be enticed on to the platform, and began asking me questions about myself with childlike affection. Maurice Browne followed, somewhat refreshed by this torrent of abuse, since the aim of his literary ambition was rather to scandalize than to convince. He was tall, thin, and unhealthy-looking, with a pallid face and pink-rimmed eyes, and an appearance altogether unfortunate in the propagator of a new cult. I believe he was, on the whole, fonder of me than Fabian was. My disastrous ugliness appealed to his distaste for the beautiful, and having once, as a complete stranger, very generously come to my aid in a difficulty, he felt ever after the natural and kindly human liking for a fellow-creature who has given one an opportunity of posing as the deputy of God. These two gentlemen, with their strong and aggressive opinions, formed the disturbing element in our yearly meeting, and, each being always at deadly feud with somebody else, might be reckoned on to keep the fun alive. Both talked to me, and me alone,

on our way to the house, with such sly hits at one another as their wit or their malice could suggest. Fabian raved about the effects of descending sun on heather and pine-covered hills, Maurice Browne bemoaned the stony poverty of the cottages, and opined that constant intermarriages between the inhabitants had reduced the scanty population to idiots. Then Fabian told me how many inquiries had been made about me by old acquaintances, who still hoped that I would some day return from the wilds, and Maurice instantly tempered my satisfaction by asking me if I had heard that the earl of Saxmundham was going to divorce his wife. The question gave me a great shock, not so much on account of the blow it dealt at an old idol still conventionally enthroned in my memory as the last love of my life, as because I knew how much distress such a report must cause to poor old Edgar.

I was quite relieved, on entering the drive, to meet my stalwart friend and his faithful companion, both very merry over some joke which had already made Mr. Fussell purple in the face. On seeing us they burst out laughing afresh. I guessed what the joke was.

"Deuced lonely up here, isn't it?" said Mr. Fussell to me. "No society, nothing but books, books—except for one short fortnight in the year. Eh, Maude?"

"Eh? eh? what's this?" said Fabian.

"'His only books are woman's looks,' and I wonder they didn't teach him the folly of bringing a band of gay and dashing cavaliers to read them to," said Edgar.

Fabian turned slowly round to me, with a look of extreme pain, and shook his head mournfully.

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave," he murmured sorrowfully, and then began to dance the Highland fling, with his rug tartanwise over his shoulder.

Maurice Browne gravely cocked his hat, pulled down his cuffs, buttoned up his coat, and requesting Edgar to carry his bag, proceeded up the drive with his hands in his pockets, whistling.

In fact the whole quartett had given themselves up to ribald gaiety at my expense, and my explanation that I had merely given a poor lady and her daughter shelter for the winter in an unused cottage only provoked another explosion. It was understood that at these bachelor meetings all rules of social decorum should be scrupulously violated, so there was nothing for it but to join in the mirth with the best grace I could.

"You know who it is," I said, half aside, to Fabian, hoping to turn him at least into an ally "It's poor little Mrs. Ellmer, the wife of that drunken painter."

But Fabian was flinty. Turning towards the rest, with his expiring Romeo expression, he wailed: "Oh, gentlemen, he is adding insult to injury; he is loading with abuse the bereaved husband of this lady to whom he has given shelter for the winter!"

"Which winter? How much winter?" asked the others.

The more they saw that I was getting really pained by their chaff the worse it became until Fabian, stalking gravely up to Ferguson, who stood on the doorstep, pointed tragically in the direction of nowhere in particular, and said, in a sepulchral voice:

"You are a Scotchman, so am I. I have been pained by stories of orgies, debaucheries, and general goings on in this neighbourhood. Tell me, on your

word as a fellow-countryman, can these gentlemen and myself, as churchwardens and Sunday-school teachers, enter this house without loss of self-respect?"

"I dinna ken aboot self-respect, gentlemen; but if you don't come in, ye'll stand the loss of a verra good dinner," answered Ferguson, with a welcoming twinkle in his eyes.

"I am satisfied," said Fabian, entering precipitately.

And the rest followed without scruple.

At dinner, to my relief, they found other subjects for their tongues to wag upon; for Maurice Browne, never being satisfied long with any topic but literary "shop," brought realism up again, and there ensued a triangular battle. For Edgar, who, now that he had passed the age and weight for cricket, had grown distressingly intellectual, was an ardent admirer of the modern American school of fiction in which nothing ever happens, and in which nobody is anything in particular for long at a time. He hungrily devoured all the works of that desperately clever gentleman who maintains that "a woman standing by a table is an incident," and looked down from an eminence of six feet two of unqualified disdain on the "battle, murder, and sudden death" school on the one hand, and on the "all uncleanness" school on the other. Not at all crushed by his scorn, Fabian retorted by calling the American school the "School of Foolish Talking," and the battle raged till long past sundown, Mr. Fussell and I watching the case on behalf of the general reader, and passing the decanters till the various schools all became "mixed schools."

At this point a diversion was created by a fleeting view caught through the door by Fabian, of Janet

carrying dishes away to the kitchen. He heaved a sigh of relief, and, with upturned eyes, breathed gently, "I would trust him another winter!"

I had bought a piano at Aberdeen, as Fabian had spread a report that he could play, while all my guests nursed themselves in the belief that they could sing. The instrument had been placed in a corner of my study against the wall. But the Philistinism of this so shocked Fabian that he instantly directed its removal into the middle of the room. This necessitated a re-disposal of most of the furniture. The centre table was piled high with my private papers. Fabian looked hastily through these, and, observing, "I don't see anything here we need keep," tumbled them all into the grate where the fire, indispensable as evening draws on in the Highlands, was burning. Mechanically, I saved what I could, while Fabian's subversive orders were being carried out round me. After a few minutes' hard work, all my favourite objects were out of sight. Maurice Browne was reclining comfortably in my own particular chair, and most of the rest of the seats having been turned out into the hall as taking up too much room, I had to sit upon To-to's kennel. The curtains were also pulled down in deference to a suggestion of Browne's that they interfered with the full sound of the voice, but I wished they had been left up when the cater-wauling began.

Mr. Fussell led off with "The Stirrup Cup," in deference to his being the eldest of the party, and also to purchase his non-intervention when the other performers should begin. It was some time before he got a fair start, being afflicted with hoarseness, which he attributed to the Highland air, and the rest unani-

mously to the Highland whiskey. When at last he warmed to his work, however, and said complacently that he was "all right" now, they must have heard him at Aberdeen. He had a good baritone voice, the value of which was discounted by his total ignorance of the art of singing, his imperfect acquaintance with both the time and the words of his songs, and his belief that the louder one shouted the better one sang. When at last, crimson and panting, but proud of himself, he sat down amid the astonished comments of the company on the strength of the roof, Maurice Browne wailed forth in a cracked voice a rollicking Irish song to the accompaniment of "Auld Robin Gray"; Fabian followed with no voice at all, but no end of expression, in a pathetic love-song of his own composition, during which everybody went to look for some cigars he had in his overcoat pocket. I refused altogether to perform, and nobody pressed me; but I had my revenge. When Edgar, strung up to do or die, asked Fabian to accompany him with "The Death of Nelson," and rose with the modest belief that he should astonish them with a very fine bass, the first note was a deep-mouthed roar that broke down the last twig of our forbearance, and we all rose as one man and declared that we had had music enough. Poor Ta-ta, who had been turned out of the room at the beginning of the concert for emulating the first singer by a prolonged howl, was let in again, and relief having been given to everybody's artistic yearnings, we ended the evening with smoke and peace.

Next morning we were all early on the moors, where we distinguished ourselves in various ways. Fabian, who worked himself into a fearful state of

excitement over the sport, shot much and often, but brought home nothing at all, and thanked Heaven, when calmness returned with the evening hours, for keeping his fellow-creatures out of the range of his wild gun. Maurice Browne made a good mixed bag of a hedgehog, a pee-wit, and a keeper's leg, and then complained that shooting was monotonous work. Edgar worked hard and gravely, but was so slow that for the most part the grouse was out of sight before he fired. Mr. Fussell did better, and attributed every failure to bring down his bird to his "d—d glasses," upon which Fabian hastened to ask him if he meant the glasses of the night before.

However, everybody but the keeper who was shot, declared himself delighted with the day's sport; but on the following morning Fabian and Maurice Browne seceded from the party and amused themselves, the former by sketching, the latter by learning by heart, by means of chats with ostlers and shopkeepers, the *chronique scandaleuse* of the neighbourhood; in the evening he triumphantly informed me that the morals of the lowest haunts in Paris were immaculate, compared to those of my simple Highland village. I am afraid this startling revelation had less effect upon me than a little incident which I witnessed next day.

I had been congratulating myself upon the fact that, though all my visitors vied with each other in attentions to Mrs. Ellmer, who had become, under the influence of this sudden rush of admirers, gayer and giddier than ever, they looked upon Babiole, as her mother had prophesied, merely as a little girl and of no account. But on the morning referred to, I came upon Fabian and the child together in my garden at

the foot of the hill. He was fastening some roses in the front of her blue cotton frock, and when he had done so, and stepped back a few paces to admire the effect, he claimed a kiss as a reward for his trouble. She gave it him shyly but simply. She was only a child, of course, and his little sweetheart of six years ago; and the blush that rose in her cheeks when she caught sight of me was no sign of self-consciousness, for her colour came and went at the faintest emotion of surprise or pleasure. As for Fabian, he drew her hand through his arm, and came skipping towards me like a stage peasant.

"We're going to be married, Babiole and I, as soon as we've saved up money enough," said he.

And the child laughed, delighted with this extravagant pleasantry.

But, though I laughed too, I didn't see any fun in it at all; for the remembrance that the time would come when this little blossom of youth and happiness and all things fresh and sweet would be plucked from the hillside, was not in the least amusing to me. And when this young artist proceeded to devote his mornings to long rambles with "the child," and his afternoons to making sketches of "the child," I thought his attentions would be much better bestowed on a grown-up person. But as Mrs. Ellmer saw nothing to censure in all this I could not interfere. It spoilt my yearly holiday for me, though, in an unaccountable fashion; and when at the end of a fortnight my guests went away, no regrets that I felt at their departure were so keen as my ridiculous annoyance on seeing that Fabian's farewell kiss to his little sweetheart left the child in tears.

CHAPTER X.

WITH the departure of my summer visitors, a gloom fell upon us all at Larkhall. Mrs. Ellmer missed her admirers and grew petulant; Babiole had discovered some new haunt, and was never to be found; while I felt the wanderer's fever growing strong upon me again. Fabian Scott had cleared up the little mystery concerning the husband and father of my tenants. It appeared that Mr. Ellmer, while neglecting and ill-using his wife without scruple when she was under the same roof with him, was subject to strong fits of conjugal devotion when two or three months of hard work, away from him, gave him reason to think that she would be in possession of a few pounds of carefully-gleaned savings, while he, her lawful and once adored husband, did not know where to turn for a glass of beer. During the winter before I found them in Aberdeen some friends with whom both mother and child had taken refuge from his drunken fury had had to pay him a heavy ransom for their kindness, besides exposing themselves to the inconvenience of having their house mobbed and their windows broken whenever the tender husband and father, having exhausted the tribute paid to keep him in the public-house, bethought himself of this new way of calling attention to his wrongs.

Fabian told me that a few weeks back he had been accosted in the Strand by Mr. Ellmer, who was looking more tattered and dissipated than ever. This

gentleman had experienced great concern at the total disappearance of his wife, had asked Fabian's advice as to the best means of finding her, and had finally let out his conviction that she was "doing well for herself," in a tone of bitter indignation. Fabian had said nothing of this meeting to Mrs. Ellmer, being, both for her sake and for mine, anxious not to touch those strings of sentiment which, in the better kind of women, sound so readily for the most good-for-nothing of husbands.

Already Mrs. Ellmer had begun to allude with irritating frequency to the talents and noble qualities of her "poor husband," whom it was the fashion among us all to consider as the "victim of art," as if art had been a chronic disease. This fiction had gone on expanding and developing until the illustrious artist, to whom absence was so becoming, had eclipsed the entire Royal Academy, and had become to his wife a source of legitimate pride which, if touching by its naïveté, was also wearisome by its excess.

Between proud reminiscences of her husband and happy memories of her late flirtation with Mr. Fussell and Mr. Browne, Mrs. Ellmer was rather disposed to treat me and my modest friendship as of small account. So the worm turned at last, by which I mean that I spent my days deer-stalking, grouse-shooting, and salmon-fishing, and my evenings with To-to, Ta-ta, and my books. This estrangement helped me to make up my mind to leave Larkhall for Italy before the winter came on, and a sharp frost in the last days of October sent me off to Aberdeen to make inquiries about my proposed journey. I would install Mrs. Ellmer and her daughter at the Hall, if they cared to remain, so that, at any rate, they would

be housed out of harm's—that is, Mr. Ellmer's—way for the winter.

Janet had particularly entreated me to be back early, as there had been ghostly noises of late in the region of the drawing-room; and though her braw laddie, John, was ample protection against bodily intruders, yet, in the case of wraiths, though I only rented the place, and therefore could have no family influence with the spirits of departed owners, I was likely, through my superior social standing, to get a better hearing from the phantoms of gentlefolk than the staunchest man-servant could hope to do.

It was past six, and already dark, when I came back and went into the study, attracted by sounds of a very elementary performance on the piano. But there was perfect silence as I entered, and no human creature to be seen. Ta-ta, however, was hovering about near the piano, now replaced in its original position in a corner against the wall. I suspected the identity of the musical ghost, and quietly seated myself by the fireplace to see what would happen. First, Ta-ta ran excitedly backwards and forwards between me and the other side of the table; then slight sounds as of stealthy creeping feet and hands were followed by a fleeting apparition of a female figure on all fours between the table and the screen.

"What are you running away for?" I asked, very gently.

Babiole was so much startled by the voice that she reappeared involuntarily, on her feet this time, from behind the screen.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Maude, indeed I'm very sorry," she began, "I didn't think you would be in so soon."

"And what have I done that you should be so sorry to see me?"

"Oh no, I didn't mean that. I'm not sorry to see you, I'm always glad to, only we never do now, you know, and I thought perhaps you would be angry at my coming into your study," said she, recovering confidence, as she saw that I was not displeased.

"Oh, so you took advantage of my being away to do what you thought I should not like?"

I spoke playfully, but Babiole hung her head.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?"

After a few moments' silence she raised her head, staring before her with the fixed and desperate earnestness of a sensitive young creature who thinks the slightest blame a terrible thing to bear.

"I don't believe it was so very wrong," she said at last. "I was so very careful; I took off my boots that I had been out on the hills in, and put on clean shoes, not to hurt the carpet; and I just put down the notes so lightly I could not have hurt the piano, and I washed my hands before touching the books."

"The books! What books have you been touching?"

"Oh, I took down several; but I couldn't read all, because they were not English."

This was satisfactory as far as it went; but then the best English authors are considered scarcely more suitable reading for "the young person" than the worst French ones.

"And which do you like the best of the English ones?"

"I like one I found yesterday, all letters from different people, with the s's like f's."

I poked the fire into a blaze, and led the girl back to the book-shelves.

"Now, show me which one you mean."

She hesitated, and looked at me, at first suspecting some trap. As I waited quietly, she at last timidly touched a volume of *The Tattler*. I pointed to a modern "popular novel," with a picture-cover and popular title, which was among the lumber of the shelves.

"Have you read that?"

"Yes," indifferently.

"Didn't you like that better than *The Tattler?*"

"Oh no!" indignantly.

"Why not? It is all about an actress."

"An actress!" contemptuously. "It isn't like any of the actresses I've ever met. It's a silly book."

"Is there any other book you like?"

"Oh yes. I like these." She passed her hand lovingly over a row—not an unbroken row, of course—of solid-looking calf-bound volumes, full of old-fashioned line engravings of British scenery, the text containing a discursive account of the places illustrated, enlivened by much historical information, apocryphal anecdote, and old-world scandal. "And *Jane Eyre*, and this." "This" was an illustrated translation of *Don Quixote*. "Oh, and I like *Clarissa Harlowe* and that book with the red cover."

"*Ivanhoe?*"

"Oh yes, *Ivanhoe*," she repeated carefully after me. Evidently, as in the case of *Don Quixote*, she had been uncertain how to pronounce the title.

"And these?" I pointed, one by one, to some modern novels. "Don't you like any of these?"

Already I began to be alarmed at the extent of her reading.

"Yes, I like some of them—pretty well."

"Why do you like *Don Quixote* and *Ivanhoe* better?"

She considered for a long time, her blue eyes fixed thoughtfully on the shelves.

"I think I feel more as if they'd really happened."

"But when you were reading *Armadale*, didn't you feel as if that had happened?"

"Oh yes," with a flash of excitement. "One night I couldn't sleep because I thought of it so much."

"Then you thought as much about it as about *Ivanhoe?*"

"Ye-es, but——" A pause. "I thought about *Ivanhoe* because I wanted to, and I thought about *Armadale* because I couldn't help it."

I went on asking her what she had read, and I own that I dare not give the list. But her frank young mind had absorbed no evil, and when I asked her how she liked one famous peccant hero, she answered quite simply:

"I liked him very much—part of the book. And when he did wrong things, I was always wanting to go to him, and tell him not to be so wicked and silly; and then, oh! I was so glad when he reformed and married Sophia."

"But he wasn't good enough for her."

"Ah, but then he was a man!" Her tone implied "*only* a man."

"Then you think women are better than men?"

"I think they ought to be."

"Why?"

"Well, men have to work, and women have only to be good."

I was surprised at this answer.

"That is not true always. Your mother is a very good woman, and has had to work very hard indeed."

"But mamma's an exception; she says so. And she says it's very hard to work as she does, and be good too."

I could scarcely help laughing, though it was pretty to see how innocently the young girl had taken the querulous speech.

"Well, and then I'm a man, and I don't have to work."

"Perhaps that's why you're so good."

I was so utterly astonished at this naïve speech that I had nothing to say. The blood rushed to the girl's face; she was afraid she had been rude.

"How do you know that I am good, Babiole?" I asked gently.

But this was taxing her penetration too much.

"I don't know," she answered shyly.

"Why do you think people are better when they don't work?"

She looked at me, and was reassured that I was not offended.

"Well, sometimes when mamma has been working very hard—not now, you know; but it used to be like that—she used to say things that hurt me, and made me want to cry. And then I used to look at her poor tired face and say to myself, 'It's the hard work and not mamma that says those things;' and then, of course, I did not mind. And when you have once had to work too hard, you never get over it as you do over other things."

"What other things?"

"Oh—fancies and—and things like that."

"Love troubles?"

She looked up at me with a shy, sideways glance that was full of the most perfectly unconscious witchery

"Yes, mamma says they're nonsense."

"She liked nonsense, too, once."

Babiole looked up at me with the delight of a common perception.

"Yes, I've often thought that. And then all men are not like——"

She stopped short.

"Papa?"

She shook her head. "One mustn't say that. One must make allowances for clever people, mamma says."

"You will be clever, too, some day, if you go on reading and thinking about what you read."

"No, I don't want to be clever; it makes people so selfish. But," with a sigh, "I wish I knew something, and could play and sing and read all those books that are not English."

"Shall I teach you French?"

"Will you? Oh, Mr. Maude!"

I think she was going to clap her hands with delight, but remembered in time the impropriety of such a proceeding. Four o'clock next day was fixed as the hour for the first lesson, and in the meantime I made another journey to Aberdeen to provide myself with a whole library of French grammars and other elementary works.

At four o'clock Babiole made her appearance, very scrupulously combed and washed, and wearing the air

of intense scriousness befitting such a matter as the beginning of onc's education. This almost broke down, however, under the glowing excitement of taking a phrase-book into one's hand, and repeating after me, "Good-day, *bon-jour;* How do you do? *Comment vous portez-vous?*" and a couple of pages of the same kind. Then she wrote out the verb "To have" in French and English; and her appetite for knowledge not being yet quenched, she then learnt and wrote down the names of different objects round us, some of which, I regret to say, her master had to find out in the dictionary, not being prepared to give off-hand the French for "hearthrug," "letter-weight," and "wainscoting." We then went through the names of the months and the seasons of the year, after which, surfeited with information, she gave a little sigh of completed bliss, and, looking up at me, said simply that she thought that was as much as she could learn perfectly by to-morrow. I thought it was a great deal more, but did not like to discourage her by saying so. I had much doubt about my teaching, having been plunged into it suddenly without having had time to formulate a method; but then I was convinced that by the time I felt more sure of my powers my pupil's zeal would have melted away, and I should have no one to experimentalise upon. As soon as I had assured her that she had done quite enough for the first lesson, Babiole rose, collected the formidable pile of books, her exercise-book, and the pen I had consecrated to her use, and asked me where she should keep them. We decided upon a corner of the piano as being a place where they would not be in my way, Babiole having a charmingly feminine reverence for the importance of

even the most frivolous occupations of the stronger sex. After this she thanked me very gravely and prettily for my kindness in teaching her, and hastened away, evidently in the innocent belief that I must be anxious to be alone.

What a light the bright child seemed to have left in the musty room! I began to smile to myself at the remembrance of her preternatural gravity, and Ta-ta put her forepaws on my knees and wagged her tail for sympathy I thought it very probable that Mrs. Ellmer would interfere to prevent the girl's coming again, or that Babiole's enthusiasm for learning would die out in a day or two, and I should be left waiting for my pupil with my grammars and dictionaries on my hands.

However, she reappeared next day, absolutely perfect in the verb *avoir*, the months, the seasons, and the pages out of the phrase-book. When I praised her she said, with much warmth—

"I could have learnt twice as many phrases if I'd known how to pronounce them!"

In fact, beginning to learn at an age when she was able to understand, and impelled by a strong sense of her own deficiencies, she learnt so fast and so well that her education soon became the strongest interest of my life, and when my fear that she would tire had worn away, I gave whole hours to considering what I should teach her, and to preparing myself for her lessons. As winter drew on, the darkening days gave us both the excuse we wanted for longer working hours. From three to half-past six we now sat together in the study, reading, writing, translating When I found her willing I had added Latin to her studies, and we diligently plodded through a course

of reading arbitrarily marked out by me, and followed by my pupil with enthusiastic docility.

All thoughts of leaving Ballater for the winter had now disappeared from my mind. I was happier in my new occupation than I remembered to have been before, and as I saw spring approaching, I regretted the short days, which had been brighter to me than midsummer.

"I mustn't keep you indoors so long now, Babiole," I said to her one afternoon in the first days of April. "I have been making you work too hard lately, and you must go and get back your roses on the hills."

I saw the light come over the girl's face as she looked out of the window, and, with a pang of self-reproach, I felt that, in spite of herself, the earnest little student had been waiting eagerly for some such words as these.

"O—h—h," she whispered, in a long-drawn breath of pleasure, "it must be lovely up among the pine-woods now!"

I said nothing, and she turned round to me with a mistrustful inquiring face. I went on looking over an exercise she had written, as if absorbed in that occupation. But the little one's perceptions were too keen for me. She was down on her knees on the floor beside my chair in a moment, with a most downcast face, her eyes full of tears.

"Oh, Mr. Maude, what an ungrateful little wretch you must think me!"

I was so much moved that I could not take her pretty apology quietly. I burst out into a shout of laughter.

"Why, Babiole, you must think me an ogre!

You really don't imagine I wanted to keep you chained to the desk all the summer!"

She took my hand in both of hers and stroked it gently.

"I would rather never go on the hills again than seem ungrateful to you, Mr. Maude."

"Ungrateful, child! You don't know how your little sunbeam face has brightened this old room."

"Has it, really?" She seemed pleased, but rather puzzled. "Well, I'm very glad, but that doesn't make it any the less kind of you to teach me."

"There has been no kindness at all on my side, I assure you."

She shook her head, and her curly hair touched my shoulder.

"Yes, there has, and I like to think that there has. Nobody knows how good you are but Ta-ta and me; we often talk about you when we're out together, don't we, Ta-ta?"

The collie wagged her tail violently, taking this little bit of affectionate conversation as a welcome relief to the monotony of our studies.

"Well, I shall leave Ta-ta with you, then, to keep my memory green while I'm away."

"Away! Are you going away?"

"Yes. I am going to Norway for the summer."

I could not tell exactly when I made up my mind to this, but I know that I had had no intenion of the kind when Babiole came into my study that afternoon. She remained quite silent for a few minutes. Then she asked softly:

"When will you come back, Mr. Maude?"

"Oh, about—September, I think."

"The place won't seem the same without you."

"Why, child, when you are about on the hills I never see you."

"No, but—but I always have a feeling that the good genius is about, and—do you know, I think I shall be afraid to take such long walks alone with Ta-ta when you're not here!"

My heart went out to the child. With a passionate joy in the innocent trust one little human creature felt towards me, the outcast, I was on the point of telling her, as carelessly as I could, that I had not quite made up my mind yet, when she broke the spell as unwittingly as she had woven it.

"Oh, Mr. Maude," she cried, with fervent disappointment; "then your friends—Mr. Scott—and the rest—they won't come here this year?"

"No," said I coolly, but with no sign of the sudden chill her words had given me, "I shall invite them to Norway this year."

Before April was over I had installed Mrs. Ellmer as caretaker at Larkhall, and, with Ferguson at my heels, had set out on my wanderings again.

CHAPTER XI.

If I went away to appease the restlessness which had attacked me so suddenly, to persuade myself that the secret of happiness for me lay in never remaining long in the same place, I succeeded badly.

It was not until I was three hundred miles away from them that I began fully to appreciate the joys of domestic life with To-to and Ta-ta, the comfort of being able to keep my books together, the supreme blessing of sitting every evening in the same arm

chair. I was surprised by this at first, till I reflected that the very loneliness of my life was bound to bring middle age upon me early. There was a period of each day which I found it very hard to get through; whether in Paris, enjoying coffee and cigarette at a café on the boulevards, or in Norway, watching the sunset on some picturesque fiord, when the day began to wane I grew restless, and, referring aimlessly to my watch again and again, could settle down to nothing till the last rays of daylight had faded away.

My four friends, when they joined me for our yearly holiday, all decided that something was wrong, but that was as far as they could agree. For while both Fabian and Edgar said that it was "liver," the former recommended camel-exercise in the Soudan, the latter would hear of nothing but porridge and Strathpeffer. And though both the fat Mr. Fussell and the lean Mr. Browne leaned to the sentimental view that love and Mrs. Ellmer were at the root of my malady, the latter suggested that to shut Mr. Ellmer up with a hogshead of new whisky and then to marry his widow would quench my passion effectually, while Mr. Fussell, with an indescribable smile, told me to go back to Paris and "enjoy myself"; and, if I didn't know how, I was to take him.

I did none of these things, however, but after my friends had returned to England, I wandered about until late October. But when the days grew short again, the home-hunger grew irresistibly strong, and I went back to the Highlands, as a gambler goes back to the cards. Of course I knew what took me there, just when the hills were growing bleak, and the deer had gone to their winter retreat in the forests. I wanted to see that girl's face in my study again, to

hear the young voice that rang with youth and happiness and every quality that makes womanhood sweet and loveworthy in a man's mind. She might conjugate Latin verbs or tell me her young girl love affairs, as she had done sometimes with ringing laughter, but I must hear her voice again.

So I arrived at Ballater without warning, and leaving Furguson at the station to order a fly and come on with my luggage, I walked to Larkhall in the dusk. There was a lamp in the study; I could see it plainly enough, for the blind was not drawn down. I saw a figure pass between the window and the light; in another minute the front door opened, and Ta-ta rushed at me, leaping on to my shoulders, and barking joyously; while Babiole herself, scarcely less fleet of foot, seized both my hands, crying in joyous welcome:

"Mr. Maude! Mr. Maude! Mr. Maude!"

I said, "How are you? I hope you are quite well. Isn't it cold?" But, indeed, no furnace-fire could have sent such a glow through my veins as the warm-hearted pressure of the girl's hands.

"Do you know, I have a sort of feeling that I *knew* you were coming to-day? The Scotch believe in second sight; perhaps it's a gift of the country. I've had all day a presentiment that something was going to happen—something *nice*, you know; and just now, before you were near enough for me to hear your step, some impulse made me get up and look out of the window. And, Mr. Maude, don't you believe mamma if she says Ta-ta moved first, because she didn't; it was I. There's always something in the air before the good genius appears, you know."

And she laughed very happily as she led me in and

gravely introduced me to her mother. Both had been knitting stockings for me, and I though the study had never looked so warm or so home-like as it did with their work-baskets and wools about, and with these two good little women making kindly welcoming uproar around me. To-to broke his chain, and climbed up on my shoulder, snarling and showing his teeth jealously at Babiole. The delighted clamour soothed my ears as no prima donna's singing had ever done. That evening I could have embraced Mrs. Ellmer with tenderness.

Next day I was alone in the drawing-room, the ladies having given up possession of the Hall and returned to the cottage, when I heard footsteps at the open door and a voice :

"May I come in, Mr. Maude?"

"Certainly"

I was busy putting up two paintings of Norwegian scenery in place of the portraits of Lady Helen, which were on the ground against the wall. On seeing my occupation, Babiole uttered a short cry of surprise and dismay I said nothing, but put my head on one side to see if one of my new pictures was hung straight. At last she spoke :

"Oh, Mr. Maude!" was all she said, in a tone of timid reproach.

"Well."

"You are not going to take her down after all this time?"

"You see I have taken her down."

"Oh, why?" It was not curiosity; it was entreaty.

"Don't you think she's been up there long enough?"

"If you were the woman and she were the man you wouldn't say that."

"What should I say?"

"You would say 'He's been up there so long that, whatever he's done, he may as well stay there now.'"

"That would be rather contemptuous tolerance, wouldn't it?"

"But the picture wouldn't know that; and if the original should ever grow sorry for all the harm she—he had done, it would be something to know that the picture still hung there just the same."

The story must have leaked out, then—the first part through Fabian, probably, and the rest through the divorce court columns of the daily papers. I said nothing in answer to the girl's pleadings, but I restored the portraits to their old places with the excuse that the landscapes would look better in the dining-room.

Our studies began again that very afternoon. Babiole had forgotten nothing, though work had, of course, grown slack during the hot days of the summer. She had had another and rather absorbing love affair, too, the details of which I extracted with the accompaniment of more blushes than in the old days.

"We shall have you getting married and flying away from us altogether, I suppose, now, before we know where we are."

"No," she protested stoutly, "I'm not going to marry; I am going to devote myself to art."

Upon this I made her fetch her sketch-book, after promising "not to tell mamma," who might well be forgiven for a prejudice against any more members of her family sacrificing themselves to this Juggernaut.

The sketches were all of fir and larch-tree, hillside and rippling stony Dee : some were in pencil, some in water-colour ; there was love in every line of each of the little pictures, and there was something more.

"Why, Babiole, you're going to be a great artist, I believe," I cried, as I noticed the vigour of the outlines, the imaginative charm of the treatment of her favourite corners of rock and forest.

"Oh no, not that," she said deprecatingly. "If I can be only a little one I shall be satisfied. I shall never dare to draw the big hills. When I get on those hills along the Gairn and see the peaks rising one behind the other all round me, I feel almost as if I ought to fall on my knees only to look at them ; it is only when we have crept down into some cleft full of trees, where I can peep at them from round a corner, that I feel I can take out my paper and my paint-box without disrespect."

"But you can be a great artist without painting great things. You may paint Snowdon so that it is nothing better than a drawing-master's copy, and you may paint a handful of wild flowers so that it may shame acres of classical pot-boilers hung on the line at the Royal Academy."

Babiole was thoughtfully silent for some minutes after this, while I turned over the rest of her drawings.

"Drawing-master's copy!" she repeated slowly at last. "Then a drawing-master is a man who doesn't draw very well, or who isn't very particular how he teaches what he knows?"

"Yes, without being very severe I think we may say that."

"That is not like your teaching, Mr. Maude."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, all these months that you've been away I've had a lot of time to think, and I see what a different thing you have made of life to me by teaching me to understand things. Last year I thought of nothing when I was out on the hills with Ta-ta but childish things—stories and things like that. And now all the while I think of the things that are going on in the great world, the pictures that are being painted, the books that are being written."

"And the dresses that are being worn?" I suggested playfully, not at all sure that the change she was so proud of was entirely for the better.

"Well, yes, I think I should like to know that too," she admitted, with a blush.

"And you want to attribute all that to my teaching?"

"Yes, Mr. Maude," she answered, laughing; "you must bear the blame of it all."

"Well, look here; I've re-visited the world since you have, and, believe me, you are much better outside. It's a horrid, over-crowded, noisy place, and, as for the artists in whom you are so much interested, you must worship them from afar if you want to worship them at all. Painters, actors, writers, and the rest—the successful ones are snobs, the unsuccessful —sponges. And as for the dresses, my child, there was never a frock sent out of Bond Street so pretty so tasteful, or so becoming as the one you have on."

But Babiole glanced down at her blue serge gown rather disdainfully, and there shone in her eyes, as brightly as ever, that vague hunger of a woman's first youth for emotions and pleasures, which every morn-

ing's sunshine seemed to promise her, and whose names she did not know.

"Ah," she said gaily, "but everybody doesn't speak like that. I shall wait until your friends come in the summer, and see what they tell me about it."

My face clouded, and, with the pretty affectionateness with which she now always treated me, she assured me that she did not really want any advice but mine, and that, as long as I was good enough to teach her, she was content to read the lessons of the busy world through my eyes.

Meanwhile, however, I was myself, through those same eyes of mine, learning a far more dangerous lesson, and one, unluckily, which I could never hope to impart to any woman. I had no one but myself to thank for my folly, into which I had coolly walked with my eyes open. But the temptation to direct that fair young mind had been too strong for me, and, having once indulged in the pleasure, the few months away had but increased my craving to taste it again. This second winter we worked even harder than the first. Babiole, with her expanding mind, and the passionate excitement she began to throw into every pursuit, became daily a more fascinating pupil. She would slide down from her chair on to a footstool at my side when discussion grew warm between us concerning an interesting chapter we had been reading. She would put her hand on my shoulder with affectionate persuasion if I disagreed with her, or tap my fingers impatiently to hurry my expression of opinion. How could she know that the ugly grave man, with furrows in his scarred face, and already whitening hair, was young and hot-blooded too, with passions

far stronger than hers, and all the stronger from being iron-bound ?

Sometimes I felt tempted to let her know that I was twenty years younger than she, growing up in the belief of her childhood on that matter, innocently thought. But it could make no difference, in the only way in which I cared for it to make a difference, and it might render her constrained with me. After all, it was my comparative youth which enabled me to enter into her feelings, as no dry-as-dust professor of fifty could have done, and it was upon that sympathy that the bond between us was founded. In the happiness this companionship brought to me, I thought I had lulled keener feelings to sleep, when, as spring came back, and I was beginning again to dread the return of the long days, an event happened which made havoc of the most cherished sentiments of all three of us.

The first intimation of this revolution was given by Ferguson, who informed me at luncheon, with a solemnly indignant face, that a "varra disreputable-looking person" had been pestering him with inquiries for Mr. Maude, and, after having the door shut in his face had taken himself off, so Ferguson feared, in the direction of the cottage, to bother the ladies. My butler's dislike of Mrs. Ellmer had broken down under her constant assistance to Janet.

"I saw that Jim was aboot the stable, sir, so I have nae doot he helped the gentleman awa' safe eno'," added Ferguson grimly.

I thought no more of the incident, which the butler had reported simply because up among the hills the sight of an unknown face is an event.

But at four o'clock Babiole did not appear ; I sat

waiting, looking through the pages of Green's *Short History of the English People*, on which we were then engaged, for twenty minutes; and then, almost alarmed at such an unusual occurrence, I was getting up to go and make inquiries at the cottage when I heard her well-known footstep through the open hall-door. Even before she came in I knew that something had happened, for instead of running in all eager, laughing apology, as was her way on the rare occasions when she was a few minutes late, I heard her cross the hall very slowly and hesitate at the door.

"Come in, come in, Babiole; what's the matter?" I cried out impatiently.

She came in then quickly, and held out her hand to me as she wished me good-afternoon. But there was no smile on her face, and the light seemed to have gone out of her eyes.

"What is it, child? Something has happened," said I, as I drew her down into her usual chair

She shook her head, and tried to laugh, but suddenly broke down, and, bursting into tears, leaned her face against her hands and sobbed bitterly.

I was horribly distressed. I tried some vague words of consolation for the unknown evil, and laid my hand lightly on one heaving shoulder, only to withdraw it as if seared by the touch. Then I sat down quietly and waited, while Ta-ta, more daring, set up a kindly howl of sympathetic lamentation, which happily caused a diversion.

"I ought to be ashamed of myself," she said, sitting upright, and drying her eyes. "I don't know what you must think of me, Mr. Maude."

"I don't think anything of you," I said at random,

being far too much distressed by her unhappiness to think of any words more appropriate. "Now, tell me, what is the matter?"

I was in no hurry for the answer, for I had already a very strong presentiment what it would be.

"Papa has found us out; he's at the cottage now."

But he was even nearer, as a heavy tread on the stone steps outside the front door at this moment told us. Babiole jumped up, with her cheeks on fire and her lips parted, rather as if prepared for the onslaught of a mad bull.

"H'm, h'm, no one about! And no knocker!" we heard a thick voice say imperiously, as my town-bred visitor stumped about the steps.

"Look here, Babiole; I think you'd better go dear. Run through the back door, and comfort mamma."

There was no use disguising the fact that our visitor's arrival was a common calamity. She made one step away, but then turned back, clasped my right hand tightly, and whispered:

"Remember, you don't see him at his best. He's a very, very clever man, indeed—at home."

Then she ran lightly away, without looking at me again, half-conscious, I am afraid, poor child, that her apology was but a lame one. I rose, and went to the hall to invite my visitor in.

CHAPTER XII.

MR. ELLMER'S appearance had not improved with the lapse of years. He was dressed in the same brown overcoat that he had worn when I made his acquaintance seven years ago. It had been new then, it was very old, worn, and greasy now; still I think it must have been in the habit of lying by for long periods, out of its owner's reach, or it could scarcely have held together so well. Mr. Ellmer wore a round-topped felt hat, a size too large for him, with a very wide and rather curly brim, from under which his long fair hair, which had the appearance of being kept in order by the occasional application of pomatum rather than by the constant use of the comb, fell down over a paper collar in careless profusion. The same change for the worse was apparent in the man himself. His face was more bloated, his look more shifting, the whole man was more sodden and more swaggering than he had been seven years ago. If it had not been for the two poor little women so unluckily bound to him, I would not have tolerated such a repulsive creature even on my doorstep; but for the sake of making such terms with him as would rid us all of his obnoxious presence, I held out my hand, which he, after a moment's hesitation, took and dropped out of his fat flabby palm, with a look of horror at my scarred face.

"Will you come in?" said I, leading the way into the study, which he examined on entering with undisguised and contemptuous disappointment.

"Have you come far to-day, Mr. Ellmer?" I asked, handing him a chair, which I inwardly resolved for the future to dispense with, having sentimental feelings about the furniture of my favourite room.

"Yes, well I may say I have. All the way from Aberdeen. And it's a good pull up here from the station to a gentleman who's not used to much walking exercise."

He spoke in a low thick voice, very difficult to hear and understand, his eyes wandering furtively from one object to another all the time.

"Did you have much difficulty in finding the place?"

"Oh yes. She had taken care to hide herself well." And his face slowly contracted with a lowering and brutal expression. "She thought I shouldn't find them up here. But I swore I would, and when I swear a thing it's as good as done."

"I hope you found your wife and daughter looking well."

"Oh, *they*'re well enough, of course; trust them to get fat and flourishing, while their husband and father may be starving!"

Now this was laughable; for whatever defects Mr. Ellmer's appearance might have, the leanness of starvation was not one of them.

"They were by no means fat and flourishing when I first met them, I assure you," I said gravely.

The brute turned his eyes on me with slow and sullen ferocity.

"That was not my fault, sir," he whispered with affected humility, being evidently far too stupid to know how his looks belied his words. "They had been away from me for some time; my wife left me

because I was unable to support her in luxury, the depression in art being very great at this moment, sir. She took my child away from me to teach her to hate her own father, and to bring her up in her own extravagant notions."

"She has cured herself of those now," I said; "she lives on the barest sum necessary to keep two people alive. It is, unfortunately, all I can spare her for her kindness in taking care of my cottage."

This was true. I had often regretted that the poor lady's inflexible independence had made her refuse to accept more than enough for her and her daughter, with the strictest economy, to live upon. Now, I rejoiced to think that she had absolutely no savings to be sucked down into the greedy maw of the creature before me. My words were evidently the echo to some statement that had been already made to him. Naturally, he believed neither his wife nor me.

"It's an astonishing thing, then, that a woman should leave her husband just to come and live like an old alms-house woman in a tumble-down cottage fifty miles farther than nowhere!"

I said nothing; indeed, I could not share his astonishment.

He went on with rising bluster, and louder, huskier voice.

"And look here, if I hadn't heard this great talk of your being such a gentleman, I don't know whether I shouldn't feel it my duty to call you to account."

I rose to my feet, unable to sit still, but at once sat down again, afraid lest I might not be able to resist the advantage a standing position afforded for taking

him by the collar and removing him to the flower-beds outside.

"You are at liberty to satisfy your marital anxiety by making any inquiries you please," said I, and looked at the door.

"Don't be affronted, it was only chaff," said he. "I know it's my daughter you're after. I saw her sneak out of here just as I came in by the back-way, as if ashamed to look her father in the face."

"You d——d scoundrel! Get up and get out of the house," I hissed out in a flash of uncontrollable rage.

He got up, and even made one slow step towards the door; but he did not go out, nor did he seem afraid of me. He turned deliberately when he was close to the screen, and began to swing his walking-stick in the old way I remembered, regardless of the consequences in a room crowded with furniture and ornaments. Then he looked into his hat, and passed his hand thoughtfully round the lining. I was still at a white heat of indignation, but to lay violent hands on this stodgy and unresisting person would have been like football without the fun.

"Look here," he said, when we had stood in this unsatisfactory manner for some moments. His eyes were fixed upon his hat, round which his podgy hand still wandered. "You're not taking me the right way. You don't like me, I can see. Well, one gentleman isn't bound to fly into the arms of another gentleman first go-off. Not at all; I don't expect it. I may like you, and I may not like you; but I don't fly at your throat and call you bad names by way of introducing myself, even though I do find my wife and daughter hiding away under the shadow of your wing, as it were, from their own husband and father."

Here he looked up at me sideways with a slow nod, to emphasise the little lesson in good breeding which his example afforded.

Perceiving some show of reason in his words, and some touch of more genuine feeling in his manner, I said, "Well!" and leaned against the chimney-piece. With this encouragement he stepped back to the hearthrug again, and while To-to half-strangled himself in futile attempts to get at his trousers, he addressed to me the following discourse, with the forefinger of his right hand upraised, and the dusty point of his cane planted deeply in a satin cushion which Babiole had embroidered for my favourite chair.

"Look here," he said, and for once his dull round eyes met mine with the straightforwardness of an honest conviction. "Full-grown women are the devil. Either they're good or they're bad. If they're bad—well, we need say no more about them; if they're good, why—the less said about their goodness the better. But a young girl, before she's learnt a woman's tricks—and especially if she's your own flesh and blood—why that's different! And my little girl, for all she shows none too much affection for her father (but that's her mother's doing), she's a little picture, and I'm proud of her. And if any infernal cad of a d——d gentleman was to be up to any nonsense with her, and so much as to put his —— hand on her pretty little head—look here, Mr. What-d'ye-call-'em, I'd make a d——d pulp of him!"

And Mr. Ellmer gripped my coat with a fierceness and looked into my face with a resolution which, in spite of the coarseness which had disfigured his speech, warmed my heart towards him. For, instead of the

contemptible sodden cur of a few minutes ago, it was a man—degraded by his course of life, but still a man, with a spark of the right fire in his heart—who stood blinking steadily at me with a persistency which demanded an answer.

I freed my coat from his grasp, but without any show of annoyance, and answered him simply at once.

"You won't have to make pulp of anybody while your daughter lives at Ballater, Mr. Ellmer. I have watched her grow from a child into—into what she is now, something—to us who love her—between a fairy and an angel; and no father could take deeper interest in his own child than I do in her."

"Deeper interest," repeated Mr. Ellmer dubiously; "No; I daresay not. But, excuse me, Mr.—Mr. ——"

"Maude."

"Yes, Mr. Maude, no offence to you, but you're a man yourself, you know."

After the contumely with which he had treated me, the admission seemed quite a compliment. I made no attempt to deny it, and this reticence emboldened him.

"Now why don't you marry her yourself?"

To have the wish which has been secretly gnawing at the foundations of your heart suddenly brought face to face with you is a startling and confounding experience. I think no convicted ruffian can ever have looked more guiltily ashamed of himself than I, as I felt the hot blood mount to my head, and my brain swim with the first full consciousness of a futile passion. Of course, the man before me put the worst construction upon my evident con-

fusion; he repeated in a louder and more blustering tone:

"Why don't you marry her?"

"In the first place," said I quietly, "she is scarcely more than a child, Mr. Ellmer."

"That's not much of a fault, for she won't improve as she loses it. Besides, you needn't marry her at once."

"In the second place, I am quite sure she wouldn't have me."

"Why not? She seems to like you."

"She does like me, as a beautiful girl may like a grandfather, battered and scarred in war, or a homeless cur which she has picked up and which has grown attached to her. To be frank with you, Mr. Ellmer, nothing but my ugly face prevents me from becoming a suitor for your daughter; but that obstacle is one which, without any undue self-depreciation, I know to be one which makes happy marriage impossible for me."

"I don't know," said Mr. Ellmer, in a tone of generous encouragement; "good looks don't always carry it off with the women. Look at my wife, now: well, to be sure, she was proud enough of getting me; but, do you think the feeling lasted? No, I might have been a one-eyed hunchback, sir, before we'd been man and wife three months! There's no knowing what those creatures will like, let alone the fact that they never like the same thing more than a week together—barring a miracle."

And Mr. Ellmer looked at me, with his head a little on one side, as if expecting that the narration of his experience would conclusively affect my views on matrimony. As I said nothing, however, being

indeed, too much involved in a whirlpool of doubts and longings and miserable certainties to have any neatly-turned phrases ready with which to carry on the conversation, he presently cleared his throat and went on again.

"You see," he said, with an odd assumption of paternal dignity, which covered some genuine feeling as well as some genuine humbug, "it isn't often that I can spare the time to take a journey as long as this. Therefore, when I do, I like to see something for my trouble. Well, and what I mean to see this time is one of two things: either I leave with the knowledge that my daughter is engaged to be married to an honourable gentleman who is able to support her, and willing to be good to her, or I leave with my daughter herself, and I put her in the way of earning her own living on the stage, which is a more honourable position than playing lodgekeeper to any gentleman in the land."

"And you would take her mother with her, of course?" I said, as easily as I could, with a sudden gloomy misgiving that Babiole, happy as she was among the hills, would snatch at the chance of rushing into the conflicts of the busier life in which she took such an ominous interest.

"Oh, she can do as she likes," answered Mr. Ellmer with a sudden return, at mention of his wife, to sullen and brutal ferocity of look and tone.

I was horrorstruck at the possibility of my little fairy choosing to leave the shelter of the hillside under the protection of this man, whose caprice of paternal pride and affection might, I thought, at any moment of drunken irritation or disappointment, change to the selfish cruelty with which he had treated his hard-working wife.

"Will you give me till to-morrow morning to think about it, and to speak to Babiole, Mr. Ellmer?' I asked, after a few moments' rapid thought. "In the meantime we will do our best to make you comfortable, either here or at the cottage. Of course, I cannot prevent your saying what you please to your daughter, but I hope you will, in fairness to me, let me plead my own cause unbiassed by one word from you. The subject is one I know she has never dreamed of, and it will surprise and may even startle her very much. So that I may ask so much of you, and beg you to rely on my discretion."

Mr. Ellmer seemed pleased with the success of his diplomacy, and he offered me a fat, pink, lazy hand to shake.

"Say no more, sir; between gentlemen that is quite sufficient. And I should like to add, sir, that if everything should turn out as we both desire, you need have no fear of being put upon by your wife's relations, whatever Babiole's mother may say. The votaries of Art, sir, are used to poverty, and need not blush for it. But I should be glad to think that my devotion to it had brought only its dignity, and not its penalties upon my daughter."

I shook his hand heartily, almost feeling, for the moment, so deep was his own conviction, that this greasy person with the paper collar—whose language and sentiments, like an untuned musical instrument, could rise and fall to such unexpected heights and depths—was really treating me with a generous condescension for which I ought to be grateful.

I accompanied him to the door, and watched his ponderous figure making its way to the cottage, near the entrance of which I saw his wife waiting for him;

then I whistled to Ta-ta, who had followed the stranger for a few steps in order to get a better view of his retreat, and, taking my hat, went down the drive for a walk. It was past five, and the April sun was shining out a fair good-night to the hills after a day of rain; faint tufts of pale green were showing on the dark foliage of the larch-trees, and the daisies in the soft grass were beginning to take heart at the death of winter. One could think better in the fresh spring-scented air, than between walls of solemn books. As for that though, my plan of action was already decided on, and contemplation of it, even under the inspiration of the perfume of the firs, and the babble of the water over the stones of the Dee, resulted in no improvement on my first idea. This was no less than to make a formal proposal to Babiole, which she must accept on the clear understanding that it was to form no tie upon her, but which would satisfy her father and allow her to remain still in the safe shelter of this nook among the hills. The girl was only fifteen, much too young for any serious love-ventures of her own, so that I argued that my engagement to her would be merely a most loyal guardianship which would reach its natural end when the handsome young prince should break his way through the enchanted forest and wake her up with the traditional kiss. Hope for myself, I can assuredly say, I had very little; and if this modesty seems excessive in a man in the very prime of life, who, moreover, had already some sort of assured place in the esteem of the girl he loved, I can only say that there was a balance against me in the books of the sex which I was paying off to this one member of it, and, therefore in proportion as I had felt myself to be too good

for the rest of those I had met, so I felt that Babiole Ellmer was too good for me. The matter was arranged in my own mind with very little trouble, and I was eager to unfold it to her. I had half expected to find her in the road through the fir-forest, knowing that after the day's rain the little maid must be thirsting for a long draught of the fresh sweet air—but no; I passed through it and out into the open country, over the stone bridge of Muick, skirted the Dee and crossed it again by Ballater Bridge into the village, without a glimpse of her.

The sun was getting low behind the hills when I reached the western foot of Craigendarroch, and, without a pause, began to climb between the glistening branches of the budding oak trees up to the top. I had no distinct purpose in coming so far, and the faint bark of my own dog, which reached my ears as I was ascending the bare and rocky space which separates the oak-grown lower slope from the fir-crowned summit of the hill, caused me to stop suddenly in surprise and excitement so sharp and so sudden that all the blood in my body seemed to rush to my head, and my heart to continue its action by unwonted, tumultuous leaps.

I pulled myself together, not without some consternation at the phenomenon.

"I came up the hill too fast," I said to myself, and crept up the slabs of rock that now formed a wet and slippery footway among the firs, with a sensation of horror at the thought of Babiole's trusting her little feet on such a treacherous path.

At the top, a little way beyond the cairn, I came upon her suddenly. She was sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree, looking out to the western hills, across

the slopes of which were lying dense, cloud-like mists, white against the blackness of the darkening hill-sides. The last red rays of the sinking sun threw upon her face a weird unnatural glow, and caused her moist eyes to glisten like strange gems in the sun-lit marble of her still features. The wild sweet sadness of her expression, like that of a gentle animal who has been stricken, and does not know why, brought a lump into my throat, and caused me to halt at some distance from her with a feeling of shy respect.

Ta-ta, who sat by her side, with a sensitively-dilating nose on the young girl's knee, saw me at once, but merely wagged her tail as an apologetic intimation that I must excuse her from attendance on me, as she had weightier business on hand than mere idle frisking about my heels.

But the movement in her companion attracted Babiole's attention; she turned her head, saw me, and started up.

The spell was broken; she was in a moment the sweet smiling Babiole of every day. But I could not so soon get over the shock of the first sight of her face: I had seemed to read vague prophecies in the wide sad eyes. I smiled and held out my hand, but I left it to her to open the conversation.

CHAPTER XIII.

"IT'S very nice up here, isn't it, Mr. Maude?" Babiole said, after a few seconds' search for an opening remark.

"But it's much too late for you to be out here by yourself."

"Yes. I had forgotten it was so late," she said humbly, with a sensitive blush at my mild reproof. "Poor mamma wanted to be quiet, and told me to go out; so I came here."

She was winding about her the thick plaid she always carried when the weather was cold; and this, when adjusted Highland fashion across the shoulder, made her, in conjunction with the knitted Tam-o'-Shanter cap she wore, a most picturesque and appropriate figure among the dead heather and the fir-trees.

"You look like Helen M'Gregor," said I, smiling.

She smiled back brightly, but shook her head.

"I haven't courage enough for myself, much less enough to inspire anybody else with," she said rather sadly.

"Courage is a thing you can't measure until you have to use it. What makes you think you have none, Babiole? I feel sure you have a great deal."

She began to laugh, in the shyest, sweetest, prettiest way; and, putting her hand on the stout stick I carried, she twisted it round and round in the earth, and looked up in my face affectionately.

"Yes, yes, I know. That is the way you always teach me. You told me I was intelligent and industrious, until I began to be both; and I daresay if you were to tell me long enough—in your own kind way, helping me on by your own strong wish—that I was brave, why I should become so. But I'm not now."

"Tell me how you know that."

"Well, to-day I only heard of something that—that would be very hard to bear, and I broke down altogether."

"What was it?"

No answer.

"Was it something your father said?"

She looked up with a flash of inquiry in her eyes.

"Was it something about your going away from here?"

She answered by a look only; a look that was timid, mournful, affectionate, and that had yet another element; for behind all this tenderness and softness, there danced the restless yearning of an eager young spirit.

"Well, and haven't I heard certain people talking about the interesting things that go on in the world, and hinting that Ballater was a slow and tiresome old place, where nothing ever happened worth mentioning?"

She blushed and hung her head a moment, and then began her defence in a very meek voice.

"I don't think I've really ever spoken so ungratefully as that about dear old Ballater. It's quite true that I should like to see a little more of the big world outside some day, but I think I could be content to hear what you care to tell me about it for a year or two longer first. The fact is, Mr. Maude," she went

on, looking up at me with an altogether irresistible smile of affection and sympathy, "I could make up my mind to leave the hills, but I can't make up my mind to leave you."

What an opening! I began to shiver and quake and to give signs of such unmistakable nervousness that Babiole evidently thought I was going to be taken with a fit of some sort. She looked helplessly around, and I gave a laugh like a schoolboy who comes too early to his first ball.

"I'm not ill, Babiole; I have something to say to you."

Upon this, she became nearly as much disturbed as I, and the colour left her sensitive face, as she sat mutely down on the tree-trunk again to hear me.

"I—don't want you to—go away—either—Babiole," I jerked out slowly and unsteadily. "You are very young, and I think you can afford to wait before seeing the world,—if you are not tired of this place and the people in it. Everybody here likes you, I may say, loves you; and, at any rate, if the life is not very exciting, it has no great cares. But your father, who does not know us so well as you do, is reluctant to leave you here without some sort of—of formal guarantee for your safety." Babiole looked up at me from time to time in bewildered expectancy of something new and awful.

"Safety!" she echoed in an amazed whisper.

"Yes. Girls, when they grow to your age, must have a—a responsible guardian, you know. How old are you?"

"I shall be sixteen in July."

"Well, you see, in a few years you will be old

enough to be married, and your father is naturally anxious to see you well provided for: established, you know, settled—in fact, married."

Babiole was growing calmer. On reflection, of course there was nothing so alarming in the mention of a woman's natural end as to justify the horror which one is accustomed to consider maidenly; but I was surprised at the time to find that she listened to me so quietly. I thought it would have helped me more if she had shied at the subject, so to speak; some little show of emotion of one kind or another would have spurred me on to make a better business of the whole thing than I was doing. Her eyes, instead of being raised from time to time inquiringly to mine, were now fixed on the last faint glow of sunlight behind the hills; but she said nothing, and I had to go on.

"He is so bent upon it, in fact, that he says that, young as you are, he will only let you remain here longer on one condition."

She looked up quickly, with a change of expression which I took for that of vague apprehension.

"What condition?"

"You must be engaged—affianced—to some one he approves of before he leaves you."

Babiole began to laugh. "But papa must know that that is ridiculous. I am not a princess, to make so much fuss about. Besides, I am old enough, mamma says, to stay with her if I like."

"We can't complain of your father for thinking so much of you. And there is a very simple way of satisfying him, if you really do care to stay any longer at the old cottage. Remember, your father could easily persuade your mother to go away with him if

he were bent on having you ; and then the old life for her would begin again."

The girl rose to her feet in great excitement.

"What is the simple way ? "

"You can become engaged to me."

I had not prepared her in the least, after all. She did not start or speak, but I could see by her face that she was utterly surprised. I was afraid of a hasty refusal, and now screwed up to the pitch of daring, I hurried on without further hesitation.

"You know, Babiole, I am not asking you to marry me now, or at any future time. That must be for a handsomer, more dashing fellow than I. But I want you to understand that I am your guardian up to the time when the dashing young fellow turns up ; and till then we will be just as we have always been. You understand, child, that there is to be no binding tie on you at all, nothing new except the understanding that I am answerable to your father for your safety and happiness. Now, are you willing to have me ? "

I tried to put the question as a joke, but I was much moved.

She put her hand into mine without at first answering, but her eyes were full of tears before I had ended.

"I will do whatever you wish, now and always, Mr. Maude," she said so sweetly, so softly, that at once I began to realise the peril to myself of what I had done, as a great yearning seized me to draw the little creature into my arms, and tell her what a poor chance it was that she would ever find among the fair-featured sons of men a slave so docile as I would be for just the right to cherish her.

I wish I had, now.

Then, however, I only said, "That's right," in a strangled voice; and we began to go down the hill together. But I discovered that this explanation, which was to have been so small and simple a thing, had already changed in some degree the character of our intercourse. Babiole gave me her hand to help her down, as freely and simply as she had often done before; but it seemed to me now that it was the hand of a fair young woman, instead of the hand of a child. It was some change in the girl herself, and not in me, I felt sure, for I had been fully conscious of my own love and my own longings ever since, on my return from Norway, I had found her still with the sweet flower-face, but with the form and shy proud manner of a budding woman. I considered this phenomenon as we crossed the wild bare slope beneath the fir-trees, and as we found our way through the growing darkness of the oak-branches, with the silver water shining before us in the distance, and the mist gathering about us as went down. There was no touch of coquetry about her manner whereby I could take courage, but a very pretty gravity which seemed to denote that even such a poor thing as a temporary and make-believe engagement to marry demanded that one should put away childish things and talk about the affairs of the nation.

We both enjoyed that walk back to Larkhall very much; she, because of the delicious new sense of importance which our secret understanding gave her; I, because there was now a link, however frail, between us, and because I was already deep enough in the mire to feel that there was but a maimed poor creature in my place when she was out of my sight. It was

dark when we got into the drive, and Mr. and Mrs. Ellmer were both about, peering into bushes, and calling their daughter in a futile way, rather to fill up the time when their *tête-à-tête* palled, than because they really expected to find her under a rhododendron or a laurel.

"I told you she was all right," said the lady sharply, as we came up.

"Aha! Where have you been?" asked her husband with ponderous roguery

"On Craigendarroch, papa," answered Babiole simply, letting her arm remain in mine, this being the straightforward way I had chosen of making known the result of our meeting.

Mrs. Ellmer was eager to break up the party, and insisted that Babiole's boots must be wet, and that she ought to come and change them. But the artist had something to say first.

"She won't catch cold. She's been too well employed, haven't you, Bab?" he asked, seizing her by the arm, with a laugh that set her blushing.

I hastened to put a stop to this inquisition.

"She will tell you all about it presently I think she had better go with her mother now, while I speak to you, Mr. Ellmer."

He let her go, being in high good humour, consequent upon the discovery and appropriation of some whisky in his wife's cupboard. I told him that his daughter had consented to become engaged to me, and assured him that I would do my best to make her happy. He grew a little maudlin over the hardship of parting with an only daughter, which, though rather far-fetched, was to be expected; but he was genuinely glad that she was well provided for, and

took care to point out to me with some shrewdness that his pride in his daughter was perfectly disinterested, as he had been so long a waif and stray upon the world that the world was considered by his relations as bound to support him, even if he had not been, as he was, too proud to accept from any man more than a mount when he was footsore, or a drink when he was thirsty.

I began to feel quite sorry for the poor beggar, and the feeling was increased later, in spite of his causing me to pass a most uncomfortable evening. They all came in to see me after dinner. Mr. Ellmer watched Babiole about with great pride, tried her voice at the piano, on which he performed with some taste, and declared that it was good enough for grand opera. On the other hand he missed no opportunity of snubbing his wife with ferocity, begging her not to skip, and advised her to leave her juvenile ways to her daughter. Poor Babiole spent the evening in torture. At each word of extravagant praise to herself she blushed uncomfortably; at every unkind speech to her mother the tears came to her eyes. In the climax of her misery I bore a most unwilling share.

I was bidding them all good-night on the doorstep, and was shaking hands with Babiole, when Mr. Ellmer, who had several times during the evening disconcerted us both by tactless reference to the supposed excited state of our feelings, said jocularly, that that was not the way sweethearts parted when he was young. Ready to satisfy him, but afraid to offend or frighten Babiole, I laughed awkwardly and hesitated, while the young girl blushed and tried, for the first time, to withdraw her hand from mine.

"Don't be affected, Bab," said her father roughly.

I would have let her go, but at the sharp words she shivered, and put up her face with a sob of sensitive terror to mine. I stooped and kissed her, and if she shrank from the touch of my trembling lips, or the contact of my hideous face with her fair cheek, at least she felt none of the burning bitterness which seemed to turn my very heart to gall, and the caress of my hungry lips into a sting. For the remembrance of the last fair girl I had kissed, of the languid indifference which had left her cold to my devotion, rushed into my brain and gave added venom to this second and more severe misfortune. She drew away from me with a new timidity, and ran down the steps after her mother, while Mr. Ellmer smoked a last cigar with me in the garden, and called upon me to condole with him, which, in the disturbed state of thought and feeling I was in, I was ready enough to do. For when he pitifully dilated on the life his acid-tempered wife had led him, on the coldness with which she had always repelled instead of encouraged him, on the martyr-like airs with which she had received his every attempt to reform, I felt that I was ready to side with the most worthless man living against the most worthy woman, and listened sympathetically; and when he pointed to the dutifully subdued fear which shone in his daughter's eyes, in answer to the gaze of his own affection, I listened in silence to his cynical conclusion:

"Women, they make you pay by the nose either way, sir. If they're not honest, they take it out of your pocket; if they're honest, they take it out of your heart. But rob you, one way or another, they all will to the end."

And he went off to the cottage in a meek and

maudlin manner, which made his subsequent conduct a most bewildering surprise. For, on the following morning, Mrs. Ellmer was not to be seen, and, on her next appearance in public some evenings later, it was evident that her husband had made a forcible appeal to her memory of old times by giving her a black eye. In the meantime Babiole was wild, shy and unapproachable by either her father or me. This state of affairs being untenable, and his wife's very small provision of whisky exhausted, Mr. Ellmer in the course of the afternoon took a dispirited farewell of us, armed with a note to the station-master at Aberdeen, which I explained would obtain him a free railway-pass to London. He thanked me for my courtesy, but was by no means disarmed by it. In the midst of a sentimental leave-taking, he suddenly flashed up into ferocity as I reminded him that his wife and daughter were well and safe with each other, which must be some comfort in the prolonged absence from them which the claims of Art forced upon him.

"Well and safe!" he repeated, his face resuming the brutal lowering look which had, under the amenities of social intercourse, sunk into a placid animal contentment. "Yes, I should hope so. For I can tell you it would be a bad time for those who had anything to do with it when my little girl was anything else but well and safe."

The man was in earnest—genuine brutal earnest. Without again offering me his hand, and with merely a nod by way of last salutation, he left me in the study, where we had been holding this last interview, with impulsive abruptness. I sat down and looked at the fire, glad the man was gone, and thinking no more of him, but of his fair little daughter, and of the

best means of effacing the uncomfortable impression made by this violent and unwelcome irruption into our old harmonious intercourse.

I had been occupied thus about ten minutes, disturbed by no sound but the dashing of the rain of a sharp April shower against the windows, when the hall-door was pushed open again, and the hoarse gruff voice I had hoped to hear no more broke upon my unwilling ears again.

"Come, no nonsense, aren't you safe with your own father?" I heard Mr. Ellmer say angrily, to the accompaniment of plaintive pleadings and protests from Babiole, whom, the next moment, he dragged in before me. He had not waited for her to put on a hat, but had thrown over her head her mother's mackintosh, which he now pulled off, leaving her pretty brown hair tumbling in disorder about her eyes. She was pitifully shy and unhappy, poor child, and she shrank back with crimson cheeks as her father drew her arm firmly through his, and brought her close up to me as I stood, in great anger and perturbation, on the hearthrug.

"Mr. Maude," he said, "you will excuse a father's solicitude."

He had been making up that opening as he came along I felt sure, from the pompous effect with which he produced it. He raised his hand as I was bursting into an angry protest, and continued—

"You have obtained my daughter's consent and my consent to becoming her affianced husband." This, too, was a studied phrase, brought out with pedantic decision. "On that understanding I leave her and her mother in this neighbourhood with confidence, and I call upon you to swear——"

But here Babiole broke away from him, and retreating quickly to the other side of the table, out of reach of the rough paternal arm, she cried out, with burning cheeks and flashing blue eyes—

"Papa, you are insulting Mr. Maude, and I can't listen. He has been the best friend we ever had; nobody knows how good he is; and now for you, who ought to thank him—honour him for what he has been to us—to talk as if you mistrusted him, as if we mistrusted him—Oh, it is too horrible! I can't bear it! How can we stay here after this? How, if we do stay here, can we look him in the face? He is the best man in all the world, and the kindest, and the cleverest; and oh! you might have trusted him, and not have brought this shame upon us!"

And the poor child crouched down upon the nearest chair, and turned away her head to hide her falling tears.

Her father listened to this outburst with unmoved pompous stolidity; but as she sank down, he looked from her to me with a proud and satisfied glance, as much as to say, "Do you observe my daughter's exquisite sensibility? This is one of the results of a parent's devotion to Art."

"Mr. Ellmer, let me walk down the drive with you," said I hurriedly, quite unmanned and nerveless at the sight of the girl's distress. "Surely, we can arrange everything to your satisfaction by ourselves."

"There I differ from you," said he, doggedly holding his ground, determined to carry through to the end his own more dramatic plan of settlement. "I am a father, Mr. Maude, and a father's sense of duty to his child must be respected. I am not insensible

that you have so far shown yourself quite the gentleman."

Babiole, so to speak, curled up at this.

"And therefore I have permitted this engagement. But I must have it plain that I hold you responsible for my little girl's happiness, and that if anything goes wrong with her, it is you—you, Mr. Maude—who will have to answer for it to me!"

He spoke with savage earnestness which impressed me, and struck terror into his daughter, whom he kissed with genuinely passionate tenderness on both cheeks.

"Good-bye, Bab," said he; "be a good girl, and don't grow too like your mother. Don't be too sweet to the man you fancy till he's your husband, and you'll have more sweetness to spare for him then. Don't believe your mother when she says your father's nothing but a blackguard, for he'll do more for you at a pinch than any of your beaux. Good-bye, child. God bless you!"

She kissed him, trembling, with timid affection answering to his tenderness—

"Good-bye, papa," she said, and added in a whisper, "Won't you some day live with mamma and me again? We would try to make you happy, and I am learning to understand all about Art."

"Ah, well, some day perhaps," he said hastily, and disengaged himself from her twining arms.

I thought he was going out without any further greeting to me, but close to the door he stopped, and giving me a stolid frown, jerked his head slowly back in the direction of his daughter; then, with a menacing nod to remind me of his warning, he left the room and the house. A minute later I saw him

blubbering—there is no other word for it—like a great overgrown child as he went down the drive.

I waited at the window on purpose to give Babiole time enough to recover enough serenity to bridge over the awkwardness of the situation. The startling necessity of the case restored her to full self-command much sooner than I had expected. After a very few minutes, during which I heard her sobs die away like a child's into silence, I ventured to turn round, and found her with red swollen eyelids and a very sad little face, but perfectly calm. She rose from her chair in quite a dignified way, and said—

"We have kept you from your work, I am afraid, Mr. Maude," with the odd primness which I could remember as one of her earliest characteristics.

"Not at all. I—I was not busy," I answered, with frozen stiffness.

For the moment I dared not speak to her, except under this ridiculous mask of frigidity; such a lot of indiscreet emotions were bubbling up in me, ready to burst into rash speech at the first opening. She seemed a little dismayed by my coldness, and hung her head in what I knew to be shame at her father's clumsy show of mistrust.

"Well, you shall have a little peace now at least," she said, without looking at me, as she crossed to the door.

"And to-day's lessons?" I asked rather abruptly.

"I think I will ask you to excuse me to-day," she said in a trembling voice.

"Certainly," said I, with an involuntary bow, which caused her to look up and redden at this unusual ceremoniousness.

The old footing was, for a time at least, completely destroyed.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Maude," she said.

"Good-afternoon," I repeated.

But, as she took another step and reached the screen, her shy glance met mine; impulsively she stretched out her hand. I seized it, and for one brief minute we looked straight into each other's eyes with the frank confidence of our old friendship: the next, she had broken away, and I was left alone with silent To-to and sympathetic Ta-ta.

CHAPTER XIV

THAT visit of Mr. Ellmer's,—hard as I tried, and, as I believe, Babiole tried, to cheat myself into believing the contrary,—spoiled the old frank intercourse between us for ever. It was my fault, I know. Dreams that stirred my soul and shook my body had sprung up suddenly on that faint basis of a spurious tie between me and the girl I had before half-unconsciously loved. Now my long-torpid passions stirred with life again and held Walpurgis Night revels within me. Our lessons had to be laid by for a time, while I went salmon-fishing, and tried to persuade myself that it had been long neglect of my rod that had caused forgotten passions and yearnings to run riot in my blood in this undisciplined manner. But it would not do. Tired out I would drag my way home, eat a huge dinner, and sink half-asleep into my old chair. Instead of my falling into stupid, happy, dreamless slumber, the leaden numbness of fatigue would settle upon my limbs, while the one figure whose growing

ascendancy over my whole nature I made these energetic efforts to throw off, would pass and repass through my mind's dull vision, the one thing distinct, the one thing ever-recurring, enticing me to follow it, eluding me, coming within my grasp, escaping me, and so on for ever.

Then I tried a new tack : the lessons were resumed. But we were both more reserved than in the old days, and I, at least, was constrained also. It was not the old child-pupil sitting by my side ; it was the woman I wanted to cherish in my bosom. The old free correction, discussion, were exchanged for poor endeavours by little implied compliments, by mild attempts at eloquence, by appeals to her sentiment when the subject in hand allowed it, to gain her goodwill, to prepare her for the time, which must come, when I should have to entreat her to forget my hideous face and try to love me as a husband.

I knew I was making hopeless, ridiculous mistakes in my conduct towards her ; that the change in my manner she took mercly as an acknowledgment that she was now in some sort " grown up," and answered by a little added primness to show that she was equal to the requirements of the new dignity. I felt that eight years' neglect of the sex threw a man a century behind the times with regard to his knowledge of women, and I was growing desperate when a ray of light came to me in the darkness of my clumsy courtship. I would consult Normanton, who was in the swim of the times, and who might be able to advise me as to the prudence of certain bold measures which, in my desperation, from time to time occurred to me. Neither Babiole nor I ever spoke about her father's visit, but the attempt to go on as

if nothing had happened never grew any easier, and I welcomed the visit of my four friends, which took place rather earlier in the year than usual.

It was in the beginning of July that they all dropped in upon me in their usual casual fashion, and we had our first dinner together in a great tempest, excited by Edgar's announcement that this was his last bachelor holiday, as he was going to be married. I listened to the torrents of comment that, by long-standing agreement among us, were bound to be free, with new and painful interest; at any rate, I reflected that the private advice I was going to ask of Edgar later would now have added weight of experience, and would, therefore, be more valuable than it could have been in the old days of his unregenerate contempt for women. To hear my Mentor browbeaten on this subject was not altogether disagreeable to me, for I had a keen memory of his somewhat lofty tone of indulgence to me in the old times.

"And—er—what induced you to take this step?" asked Fabian, in an inquisitoral tone, which implied the addition, "without consulting us." He was holding a glass of sherry in his hand, and he looked at it as if he thought that his friend's unaccountable conduct had spoilt its flavour.

Edgar blushed and looked conscience-stricken. I feasted my eyes upon the sight.

"Well, I believe there is always a difficulty about giving a satisfactory account of these things,—an account, that is to say, which will satisfy the strict requirements of logic."

"We expect an account consistent with your own principles, often and emphatically laid down. If you have not sinned against those, you will be listened to

with indulgence," said Fabian dogmatically. "You shall be judged under your own laws."

"Come, that's rather hard upon him," pleaded Mr. Fussell.

Edgar dashed into his explanation in an off-hand manner.

"I met her at a tennis-party." Maurice Browne, who hated muscular exercise, groaned. "She was dressed in light blue flannel." Fabian, who had been at Oxford, hissed. Edgar stopped to ask if this conduct were judicial.

"As a set-off against your advantage of being judged by your own laws, we claim the right to express our feelings each in his own manner," explained Fabian. "Go on."

"We entered into conversation." Dead but excited silence. "I found she had read Browning,"—Murmurs of disgust from Fabian, of incredulity from Browne; placid and vague murmur, implying ill-concealed non-apprehension, from Mr. Fussell,—"but did not understand him." Explosion of mirth, in which everybody joined. "I offered my services as some sort of interpreter." Sardonic laugh from Browne. "Merely on the assumption that a bad guess is better than none." Interpellation from Fabian, "'Tis better to have guessed all wrong, than never to have guessed at all." Edgar continued: "After that we met again,"—deep attention,—"and again." Murmurs of disappointment. "At last we became engaged."

A pause. Fabian drank a glass of champagne off hastily, and rose with frowns.

"It seems to me, gentlemen, that a taste for Browning and blue flannel, which is all our honourable friend seems to be able to put forward in favour

of this lady, is a poor equipment for a person who (unless our honourable friend has gone back very far from his often-declared views on the subject of matrimony) is to be his guiding genius to political glory, the spur to his languid ambition, the beacon to his best aspirations,—in fact, gentlemen, the tug-boat to his man-of-war."

"And as no girl reads Browning except under strong masculine pressure," added Browne gravely, "our friend the man-of-war must make up his mind that other and perhaps handsomer vessels have been towed before him, with the same rope."

"Is the lady handsome?" asked Mr. Fussell.

Edgar hesitated. "She has an intelligent face," he said.

Upon this there arose much diversity of opinion; Fabian holding that this was consistent and even praiseworthy, while Maurice Browne and Mr. Fussell agreed that to deliberately marry a woman without positive and incontestable beauty ought to disqualify a man for the franchise as a person unfit for any exercise of judgment. When, however, Edgar, after allowing the controversy to rage, quietly produced and passed round the portrait of a girl beautiful enough to convert the sternest bachelor, there was a great calm, and the conversation, with a marked change of current, flowed smoothly into the abstract question of marriage. Edgar was not only acquitted; he changed places with his judges. Every objection to matrimony was put forward in apologetic tones.

"For my part, when I speak bitterly of marriage, of course I am prejudiced by my own experience," said Mr. Fussell, with a sigh that was jolly in spite of himself. He was separated from his wife,—everybody

knew that; but he ignored—perhaps even scarcely took in the significance of—the fact that he had previously deserted her again and again.

Maurice Browne averred that his only objection to marriage was that it was an irrational bond; men and women, being animals with the disadvantage of speech to confuse each other's reason, should, like the other animals, be free to take a fresh partner every year.

This was received in silence, none of us being strong enough in natural history to contradict him, though we had doubts. He added that a book of his which was shortly to be brought out would, he thought, do much to bring about a more logical view of this matter, and to do away with the present vicious, because unnatural, restrictions.

Mr. Fussell, the person present whose private conduct would the least bear close inspection, was sincerely shocked, and wished to speak in the interests of morality, when Fabian broke in, too full of his own views to bear discussion of other people's.

"Marriage," he asserted is his excitable manner, "for princes, for dukes, for grocers, and, in fact, the general rabble of humanity, is not a choice, but a necessity, according to the present state of things, which I see no pressing need to alter. But for the chosen ones of the earth—the artists,"—involuntarily I thought of Mr. Ellmer,—"by which I, of course, mean all those who, animated by some spark of the divine fire, have obeyed the call of Art, and given their lives and energies to her in one or another of her highest forms,—for us artists, I say, marriage is so much an impediment, so much an impossibility, that I unhesitatingly brand as mock-artists those

fiddlers, mummers, and paint-smudgers who prefer the vulgar joy of domestic union to the savage independence and isolation which Art—true Art—imperatively demands. The wife of an artist—for as long as the pure soul of an artist remains weighted by a gross and exacting body, as long as he has dinners to be cooked, shirt-buttons to be sewn on, and desires to be satisfied, he may have what the world calls a wife; that wife must be content with the position of a kindly-treated slave."

At this point there arose a tumult, and somebody threw a cork at him. He wanted to say more, but even Browne, who had given him a little qualified applause, desired to hear no more; and amid kindly assurances that hanging was too good for him, and that it was to be hoped Art would make it hot for him, and so forth, he sat down, and I, perceiving that we were all growing rather warm over the subject, suggested a move to the drawing-room, into which I had had the piano taken.

A little figure in pale pink stuff sprang up from a seat in the corner as we came in, letting a big volume of old-fashioned engravings fall from her arms. It was Babiole, who had been too deep in her discovery of a new book to expect us so soon. She gave a quick glance at the window by which she had prepared a way of escape; but seeing that it was too late, she came forward a few steps without confusion and held out her hand to Fabian, who seemed much struck with the improvement two years had brought about in her appearance. Then, after receiving the greetings of the rest, she excused herself on the plea that her mother was waiting for her at tea, and made a bow, in which most of us saw a good deal of

grace, to Maurice Browne, who held open the door for her.

As Browne then made a rush to the piano, I lost no time in taking Edgar on one side under pretence of showing him an article in a review, and in unburdening myself with very little preface. I was in love, hopelessly in love. He guessed with whom at once, but did not understand my difficulty.

"She seems a modest, intelligent little girl; she has every reason to be grateful to you, even fond of you. Why should you be so diffident?"

I explained that she was beautiful, romantic, inexperienced; that her head was still full of silky-locked princes and moated castles, or with creatures of her fancy little less impossible; all sorts of dream-passions were seething in her girl's brain I knew, for I understood the little creature with desperate clearness of vision which only seemed to make her more inaccessible to me. If I could only conquer that terrible diffidence, that overwhelming awe that her fairy-like ignorance and innocence of the realities of life imposed upon me, I felt that I could plead my cause with a fire and force that would surmount even that ghastly obstacle of my hideous face; but then, again, fire and force were no weapons to use against the indifference of child-like innocence; and to ask her in cold blood to marry me without making her heart speak first in my favour would be monstrous. She had looked upon me till lately as she would have looked upon her grandfather, and this unsatisfactory affection had given place lately to a reserve which was even more unpromising. Edgar listened to me, did not deny the enormous fascination of a young mind one has one's self helped to form, but thought

that I should resist it, and was rather indignant that I had not taken the opportunity of her father's visit to rid myself of mother and daughter together. He inclined to the idea that the two unlucky women were imposing on my generosity and were determined to make "a good thing" out of me, and it was not until I had spent some time in explaining minutely the footing upon which we stood to one another that his prejudices began to give way.

At this point I perceived that Maurice Browne was playing at chess with Mr. Fussell, while Fabian had disappeared. When the game was over, they insisted on our joining them at whist. Before we had played one game I began to grow nervous at Fabian's long absence, and Mr. Fussell, who was my partner, took to leaning over the table as soon as I put down a card, and with one finger fixed viciously in the green cloth, and his starting eyes peering into my face over his double eyeglass, saying in a sepulchral voice:

"*Did* you see what was played, Mr. Maude?"

I had trumped his trick, revoked, and done everything else that I ought not to have done before the missing Fabian came back in a tornado of high spirits, and with a tiny white Scotch rose at his buttonhole. Now there was only one Scotch rose-bush in the garden, and it grew by the porch of the cottage and was Babiole's private property. When the hand was played out I got Fabian to take my place, for my fingers shook so that I could not sort my cards.

When I had been arguing with Edgar the necessity of delicacy in making love to a young girl, Fabian had dashed into the breach, and now bore the trophy of a first success on his breast.

CHAPTER XV.

I BELIEVE that Edgar, in the innocence of his heart, thought that Fabian's headlong flirtation and flaunting success with the girl I loved in such meek and forlorn fashion formed a salutary experience for me.

For while the young actor invariably sloped from fishing excursions, and disappeared from picnics, and had a flower which I absolutely recognised in his buttonhole every day, Edgar contented himself with preaching to me a philosophical calm, and ignored my pathetic insinuations that he might do some unspecified good by "speaking to" Fabian. Indeed, that would have been a delicate business; especially as I had announced myself to be the girl's guardian, and she was thus undeniably well provided with protectors. All the consolation I had was the reflection that this flirtation could only last a fortnight; but as it was my guests themselves who fixed not only the date but the duration of their stay, even this comfort was destroyed by their agreeing among themselves to extend their visit another ten days. When I learned that this was upon the proposal of Fabian I took a stern resolution. I invited Mrs. Ellmer and her daughter to join us in all our expeditions, so as to establish an effective check upon the freedom of their intercourse. The result of this was that Mrs. Ellmer abandoned herself to a rattling flirtation with Mr. Fussell, while Fabian walked off with Babiole to gather flowers, or to climb hills, or to race Ta-ta, in

the most open manner, and Edgar laughed at my annoyance, and talked about hens and ducklings to me in an exasperating undertone.

I think he began to believe that I was entering prematurely into the doddering and senile stage—this straight, wholesome, handsome fellow, who disdained the least pang of jealousy of the girl who was fortunate enough to have secured his magnanimous approval. If he had been branded with a disfiguring scar, he would have renounced the joys of love with such staunch, heroic, "broad-shouldered" fortitude, that there would have been quite a rush for the honour of consoling him; it was not in him to find anything deeper than lip-compassion for feverish and morbid emotions. I admired his grand and healthy obtuseness, and wished that he could bind my eyes too. But I saw plainly enough the radiance of unnatural exaltation of feeling which lighted up the young girl's face after a walk with Fabian, and I knew that the hectic enthusiasm of his artist temperament was kindling fires in the sensitive nature, which it would be danger to feed and ruin to extinguish. With a morbid sensibility of which I was ashamed, I could look into the girl's glowing blue eyes as I shook her hand and bade her good-night, and I feel in my own soul every emotion that had stirred her heart as she roamed over the hills with Fabian that day.

It was near the end of the third week of my visitors' stay, that I waited one night for Fabian's return from the cottage, to which he and Mr. Fussell had escorted the two ladies, who had dined with us. Mr. Fussell had returned, and gone into the house to play cards. Fabian came back sixteen minutes later

There had been a proposal to extend my visitors' stay still further, and upon that hint I determined to speak. I was leaning against the portico, as we called the porch of the house, to distinguish it from that of the cottage. I had smoked through two cigars while I was waiting, but at the sound of his footsteps I threw the third away. Fabian walked with a long swinging step: off the stage the man was too earnest to saunter; crossing a room, eating his breakfast, always seemed a matter of life or death to him; and if he had to call a second time for his shaving-water, it was in the tones of a Huguenot while the Saint Bartholomew was at its height. I had always looked upon him as a very good fellow, impetuous but honourable, doing intentional harm to no one. But I knew the elasticity of my sex's morality where nothing stronger than the sentiments is concerned, and I knew that his impetuosity was kept in some sort of check by his ambition. His restless erratic life, and his avowed principles, were antagonistic to happy marriage, and I knew that he was in the habit of satisfying the *besoin d'aimer* by open and chivalrous attachments to now one and now another distinguished lady; and this knightly devotion to Queens of Love and Beauty, though it makes very pretty reading in the chronicles of the Middle Ages, is not, in the interest of nineteenth century domestic peace, a thing to be revived. So, although I had miserable doubts that the steed was already stolen, I determined to lock the stable door.

"Lovely night," said he. "I like your Scotch hills at night; and, for the matter of that, I like them in the daytime too."

Fabian always sank the fact that he was a Scotchman, though I burned just now with the conviction that he was tainted with the national hypocrisy.

"I suppose you will be glad to get back to the hum and roar again by this time, though," I said as carelessly as I could.

Fabian had none of Edgar's serene obtuseness. He looked at me to find out what I meant.

"Well, you know, we were thinking of imposing ourselves upon you for another week, if you have no objection."

This show of civility was the first shadow on our unceremonious intercourse. In spite of myself I was this evening grave and stiff, and not to be approached with the customary affectionate familiarity. There was silence while one might have counted twenty. Then I said:

"'That was *your* proposal, was it not?"

I spoke so gravely, so humbly, that my question, rude as it was in itself, could not offend.

"Why—yes," said he in a tone as low and as serious as my own. "What's the matter, Harry?"

"Will you tell me, honestly, why you want to stay?"

His big burning eyes looked intently into my face, and then he put one long thin hand through his hair and laughed.

"Well, after all that you have done to make our stay agreeable, that's a queer question to ask."

I put my hand on his shoulder and forced him to keep still.

"Look here, Faby, I don't want to insult you, you know; but are you staying because of that little girl?"

He drew himself up and answered me with a very fine and knightly fire:

"Do you take me for a scoundrel?"

"No; if I did you would never have touched the child's hand."

"Then what do you mean?"

"Simply this, that I know Babiole better than you do, and I can see that every word you say to her strikes down deeper than you think. She is an imaginative little—fool if you like; she believes that the romance of her life is come, and she is beginning to live upon it and upon nothing else.

Fabian considered, looking down upon the grass, in which he was digging a deep symmetrical hole with his right heel. At last he looked up.

"I think you're wrong; I do indeed," he said earnestly. "You know as well as I do that my trotting about with her has always been as open as the day; that it was taken for granted there was no question of serious love-making with a mere child like that. I'm sure her mother never thought of such a thing for a moment.

Now I knew that Mrs. Ellmer, on principle, scoffed so keenly at love in her daughter's presence, by way of wholesome repression of the emotions, that she would be sure to think that she had scoffed away all danger of its inopportune appearance.

"My dear boy, I acquit you of all blame in the matter. The mother we can leave out of account; she is not a person of the most delicate discrimination. But I tell you I have watched the girl——"

"That is enough," interrupted Fabian abruptly, and with off-hand haughtiness. "Of course, if I had

understood that you were personally interested in the little girl——"

I interrupted in my turn. "I am interested only in getting her well, that is—happily—married."

Fabian bowed. "You are anticipating your troubles with your ward, or pupil, or whatever you call her," he said lightly, though he was angry enough for his words to have a bitter tone. "However, of course I respect your solicitude, and Babiole and I must, for the next few days, hunt butterflies on separate hills."

And shaking me by the shoulder, and laughing at me for an old woman, he went into the house.

But he was obstinate, or more interested than he pretended to be. I know that it was he who next morning at breakfast put up Fussell and Maurice Browne to great eagerness for the extension of their stay. When I regretted that I had made arrangements for going to Edinburgh on business on the date already settled for their departure, Fabian glanced up at my face with a vindictive expression which startled me.

This was the last day but one of my visitors' stay. We all went on the coach to Braemar, having taken our places the night before. As we all walked in the early morning to Ballater station, from which the coach starts, I overheard Fabian say to Babiole:

"We shan't be able to see much of each other to-day, little one. Your maiden aunt disapproves of my picking flowers for you. But I'll get as near as I can to you on the coach, and this evening you must get mamma to invite me to tea."

"Maiden aunt!" she repeated, evidently not understanding him.

They were behind me, so that I could not see their faces; but by a glance, a gesture, or a whisper Fabian must have indicated me; for she burst out:

"Oh, you must not laugh at him; it is not right; I won't hear anything against Mr. Maude."

"Sh! Against him! Oh dear, no!" And the sneer died away in words I could not hear.

They had fallen back, I suppose, for I lost even the sound of their voices; but I heard no more than before of the monologue on the New Era in literature to which Maurice Browne was treating me. He was the pioneer of this New Era, so we understood; and there was so much more about the pioneer than about the era in his talk on this his favourite subject, that we, who were quite satisfied to know no more of the inmost workings of his mind than was revealed by the small talk of daily existence, seldom gave him a chance of unburdening himself fully except when our minds, like mine on this occasion, were deeply engaged with other matters.

On the coach Fabian sat next to Babiole, who looked so sweet in a white muslin hat and a frock made of the stuff with which drawing-room chairs are covered up when the family are out of town, that Maurice Browne, in a burst of enthusiasm, compared her to a young brown and white rabbit. Fabian had brought his umbrella, so I told myself, for the express purpose of holding it over his companion in such a manner as to prevent me, on the back seat, from seeing the ardent gaze of the man, the shy glances of the girl, which I jealously imagined underneath. Everybody declared that it was a beautiful drive; I had thought so myself a good many times before. The winding Dee burnt its way through the

valley in a blaze of sunlight on our left, past the picturesque little tower of Abergeldie, with its rough walls and corner turret; past stately, romantic Balmoral, whose white pinnacles and battlements peeped out, with royal and appropriate reserve, from behind a screen of trees, on the other side of the river, far below us. Near here we found our fresh teams, standing quietly under a tree, by a ruined and roofless stone building. Oddly frequent they are, these ruinous farms and cottages, in the royal neighbourhood. As we drew near Braemar the scenery grew wilder and grander. Between the peaks of the bare steep hills, where little patches of tall fir-trees grow on inaccessible ledges on the face of the dark-gray rock, we caught glimpses of Locknagar, with its snow-cap dwindled by the summer sun into thin white lines. We passed close under steep Craig Clunie, where the story goes that Colonel Farquharson, of Clunie, hid himself after the battle of Culloden, and heard King George's soldiers making merry over their victory in his mansion, which, in common with all old Scotch country-houses, is called a castle. As the castle is three-quarters of a mile from the Craig, Edgar opined that the Colonel must have had sharp ears. Then he scoffed a little at the obstinate ignorance of the Highland gentlemen who would hazard an acre in defence of such a futile and worthless person as Charles James Stuart. Edgar had advanced political notions, which, in another man, I should have called rabid. I said that if it had been merely a matter of persons, and not of principles, I should have backed up the Colonel, since I would sooner swear allegiance to a home-born profligate than to one of foreign growth; but then I own I

would have English princes marry English ladies, and I feel a sneaking regard for Henry the Eighth for having given his countrywomen a chance, and thereby left to the world our last great sovereign by right of birth, Queen Elizabeth.

That umbrella in front of me had made me cantankerous, I daresay; at any rate, I disagreed persistently with Edgar for the rest of the way, and called Old Mar Castle a mouldy old rat-hole merely because he was struck with admiration of its many-turreted walls. We had luncheon at the Fife Arms, where we were all overpowered by Mr. Fussell, who, having been allowed by the coachman to drive for about half a mile as we came, became so puffed up by his superiority, and so tiresomely loud in his boasts about his driving that, Fabian being too much occupied with Babiole to shut him up, and nobody else having the requisite dash and disregard of other people's feelings, we all sneaked away from the table, one by one, as quickly as we could, and left him to finish by himself the champagne he had ordered. These three, therefore, spent the hours before our return in the neighbourhood of Braemar together. While keeping within the letter of his promise to have no more *tête-à-tête* walks with Babiole, Fabian thus easily violated the spirit of it; since Mr. Fussell, being too stout and too sleepy after luncheon to do much walking, suggested frequent and long rests under the trees, which he spent with gently-clasped hands, and a handkerchief over his face to keep the flies off.

The rest of us took a beastly hot walk to the Falls of Corriemulzie, and I wondered what I could have before seen to admire in them. Coming back, Mrs.

Ellmer chased Maurice Browne for some indiscreet compliment. A tropical sun would not have taken the vivacity out of that woman! and Edgar fell through a fence on which he was resting, was planted in a bramble, and said "Damn" for the first recorded time in the presence of a lady. That is all I remember of the expedition.

For the return journey, as Mr. Fussell had retired into the interior of the coach for a nap, being the laziest of men when he was not the busiest, I took the box-seat by the coachman, and was thus spared the sight of another *tête-à-tête*. After dinner that evening Fabian disappeared as usual in the direction of the cottage, and on the following day, which was the last of my visitors' stay, he threw his promise to the winds so openly that I began to think he must have made up his mind to let his principles go by the board, and make love seriously. In that case, of course, I could have nothing to say, and however much I might choose to torment myself with doubts as to the permanent happiness of the union, I had really no grounds for believing that his vaunted principles would stand the test of practical experience better than did the ante-matrimonial prattle of more commonplace young men.

On the morning of my guests' departure the house was all astir at five o'clock in the morning. There was really no need for this effort, as the train did not leave Ballater till 8.25, and my Norfolk cart and a fly from M'Gregor's would not be at the door before half-past seven. But it was a convention among us to behave to the end like schoolboys, and, after all, a summer sunrise among the hills is a thing to be seen once and remembered for ever.

So there was much running up and down stairs, and sorting of rugs and collecting of miscellaneous trifles (I declare if they had been professional pick-pockets I could not have dreaded more the ravages they made among the more modern and spicy of the volumes in my library), and there was a general disposition to fall foul of Edgar for the approaching vagary of his marriage, which would break up our Round Table hopelessly.

"I look upon this as a 'long, a last good-bye," to Normanton," said Maurice Browne, shaking his head. "No man passes through the furnace of matrimony unchanged. When we see him again he may be a *better* man, refined by trial, ennobled by endurance; but he will not be the *same*. He will be a phœnix risen from the ashes of the old——"

"Or a wreck broken up by the waves," added Mr Fussell.

I looked out of one of the eastern windows at the red sun-glow, in which I took more pleasure than the Londoners, perhaps because I considered it as a part of my Highland property. To the left, standing in the long wet grass, shyly hiding herself among the trees, was Babiole; I went to another window from which I could see her more plainly, and discovered that her little face was much paler than usual, that she was watching the portico with straining eyes; in her hand, but held behind her, was a red rose, that she drew out from time to time and even kissed. I think she was crying. It was half-past six o'clock. I turned away and went back to my friends, who were already deep in a gigantic breakfast. From time to time I went back, on some pretext or other, to the window: she was always there, in the same place.

The fourth time I looked out she was shivering; and her hands, red with the cold of the morning, were tucked up to her throat, red rose and all. I went up to Fabian, who I am sure must have been at quite his third chop, and touched him on the shoulder.

"There's some one waiting outside,—waiting for you, I think," said I, in a low voice, under cover of the rich full tones of my true friend Fussell, who was waxing warm in the eloquence of his farewell to Scotch breakfasts.

Fabian got up at once and went out. I saw the child start forward, crimson in a moment, and the tears flowing undisguisedly; and with a choking feeling at my throat I turned away.

"Hallo, why you're not eating, Harry," cried Maurice presently. "You must be in love."

"Another of 'em!" groaned Fussell.

"No," said I hastily. "The fact is I had something to eat before you came down."

There was a roar at my voracity, but their own appetites were too vigorous for them to disbelieve me. I remember clearly only this of our final departure for the station: that Fabian turned up late, dashing after us down the drive in fact, and leaping up on to the Norfolk cart beside me. And that his eyes were dry, but that the front of his coat, just below the collar, was wet, perhaps with the dew. Nevertheless, if Edgar had not been behind us, I should have felt much inclined, when we drove along the road by the Dee, just where the bank is nice and steep, to give a jerk of the reins to the left, pitch my artistic friend out into the river's stony bed, and take my risk of following him.

CHAPTER XVI.

LIFE seemed to move in a somewhat slow and stagnant manner for several days after the departure of my guests. I scarcely saw Babiole, and never spoke to her, a great shyness towards each other having taken possession of both of us. Mrs. Ellmer, upon whom I made a ceremonious call when I could contain my anxious interest no longer, was stiff in manner, haughty and depressed. She had evidently been informed of my opposition to Fabian's intention of extending his stay, and I soon learnt, to my great surprise, that she considered me responsible for the destruction of Babiole's first chance—"and the only one she is likely to have, poor child, living poked up here," of "settling well."

"Oh," said I, raising my eyebrows, and putting into that one exclamation as much sardonic emphasis as I could, while I kept my eyes fixed upon the cat and my hands much occupied with my deer-stalker, "and may I be permitted to learn how I have done this?"

"It is useless to put on a satirical manner with me, Mr. Maude," said the lady with dignity; "I am perfectly aware that it was you who objected to Mr. Scott's remaining here long enough to make proposals for my daughter, and that, in fact, you interfered in the most marked way with his courtship of her."

"And are you ignorant of the fact, madam, that to interfere with a man's courtship is the very way to

increase its warmth, and that if my interference, as you call it, could not screw him up to the point of proposing, nothing ever would?"

Mrs. Ellmer dropped into her lap the work which she had snatched up on my entrance, and at which she had been stitching away ever since, as a hint that she was busy and would be glad to be left alone; at the same time being, I think, not sorry to vent her ill-humour on some one.

"You are using very extraordinary expressions, Mr. Maude," she said acidly. "If her mother was satisfied with the gentleman's behaviour, I really don't see what businesss you had in the affair at all."

"Do you forget that her father has made me responsible for the care of her? that she is certainly under my guardianship, and nominally engaged to me."

"Nominally! There it is. To be engaged to a man who acknowledges that he never means to marry you! There's a pretty position for a girl, as I've said to Babiole scores of times!"

My heart leaped up.

"You've said that to Babiole!" I echoed, in a voice of suppressed rage that brought the little slender virago at once to reason.

"Well, Mr. Maude, with all respect to you, the position is something like that," she said more reasonably.

"It is not at all like that," I answered in my gravest and most magisterial tones. "If your daughter could by any possibility overcome a young girl's natural repugnance to take for husband such an unsightly object as accident has made me, I should be a much happier man than I am ever likely to be But

she could not do so; there is such a ghastly incongruity about a marriage of that sort that I could scarcely even wish her to do so."

Mrs. Ellmer's eyes had begun to glow with the carefully but scarcely successfully subdued interest of the match-making mamma. This, however, gave place to uneasy disappointment as I went on:

"All the same I take an interest in your daughter's happiness quite as strong as if it were a more selfish one. It was that interest which prompted me to prevent the prolonging of a flirtation which might have serious consequences for your sensitive and impressionable little daughter."

"Serious conscquences!" stammered Mrs. Ellmer. "Do you mean to say that Mr. Scott, your friend, is a dishonourable man?"

"No," said I, "I would not say anything so severe as that. But I am certainly of opinion that Mr. Scott had no more serious intention than to fill up his time here pleasantly by talks and walks with a pretty and charming girl. Lots of pretty and charming girls accept such temporary devotion for what it is worth, and their regrets, when the amusement is over, are proportionately light. But I know that Babiole is not like that, and so I did all that my limited powers of guardianship could do to lessen the danger."

"But he may still write and propose," murmured the dismayed mother. "Even if his intentions were not serious while he was here, he may find he cannot get on without her!"

I wanted to shake the woman, or to box her ears, and ask her how she had dared wittingly to expose her daughter to the misery of hanging on to such a hope as this.

"I don't think it's likely," I said drily; and questioning my face with doubt in her eyes, the match-maker tried another tack.

"After all, Mr. Maude, it may be for the best," she began in a conciliatory tone. "It was I, rather than Babiole, that was so hot upon this match, not understanding that my poor child had any chance of a better husband. For my part, I don't see that you have any reason to talk about yourself in the disponding manner you do, and if you will only trust for a little while to my diplomacy, and speak to her when I give you the word that it's the right moment——"

I interrupted her by standing up suddenly, and I can only hope my face did not express what I thought of her and her miserable diplomacy.

"You will oblige me by saying not one word to your daughter on the subject of me and my impossible pretensions," I said authoritatively, but with a sickening knowledge that my demand would be disregarded. "I am sensitive enough and humble enough on the score of my own disadvantages, I admit. But I am not a miserable wreck of humanity who would take what perfunctory favours a woman would throw to him, and be satisfied. I am a man with powers of loving that any woman might be proud to excite; and no girl shall ever be my wife who does not feel of her own accord, and show, as an innocent girl can, that I have done her a honour in loving her which she is bound to pay back by loving me with all her might.

And much excited by my own unexpected burst of unreserve, but somewhat ashamed of having rather bullied a poor creature who, however she might assume the high hand with me, was after all but an

unprotected and plucky little woman, I held out my hand with apologetic meekness and prepared to go. Mrs. Ellmer shook my hand limply and showed a disposition to whimper.

"Don't worry yourself and don't bother—I mean—er—don't talk to the child. It will come all right. She's hardly grown up yet; there's plenty of time for half-a-dozen princely suitors to turn up. And what do you say to taking her once a week to Aberdeen and giving her some good music lessons? It will distract her thoughts a bit, and do you both good."

This suggestion diverted the little woman's tears, and her face softened with a kindly impulse towards me.

"You are very good, Mr. Maude, you really are," she said in farewell as I left her.

And though I was grateful for this *amende*, I should have been more pleased if I could have felt assured that she would not, in default of Mr. Scott, tease her daughter with recommendations to get used to the idea of myself in the capacity of lover.

Of course after this interview I was more shy than ever of meeting Babiole, and even when, on the second evening afterwards, I saw her standing in the rose garden, apparently waiting for me to come and speak to her, I pretended not to see her, and after examining the sky as if to make out the signs by which one might predict the weather of the morrow, I turned back to finish my cigar in the drive. But the evening after that I found on my table a great bowl full of flowers from her own private garden, and on the following afternoon, while I was writing a letter, there came pattering little steps in the hall and a knock at my open study door.

"Come in," said I, feeling that I had gone purple and that the thumping of my heart must sound as loudly as a traction engine in the road outside.

Babiole came in very quietly, with a bright flush on her face and shy eyes. Her hands were full of tiny wild flowers, and among them was one little sprig carefully tied up with ribbon.

"I found a plant of white heather this morning on one of the hills by the side of the Gairn," said she quickly. "You know they say it is so rare that some Highlanders never see any all their lives. It brings luck they say."

"Why do you bring it to me then?" I asked, as she put the little blossom on the table beside me. "You should keep luck for yourself, and not waste it on a person who doesn't deserve any."

She had nothing to say to this, so she only gave the flower a little push towards me to intimate that I was to enter into possession without delay I took it up and stuck it in the buttonhole of my old coat.

"It has brought me luck already, you see, since this is the first visit I have had from you for I don't know how long," I said, looking up at her, and noticing at once with a pang that she had grown in ten days paler and altogether less radiant.

She blushed deeply at this, and sliding down on to her knees, put her arms round Ta-ta, and kissed the collie's ears.

"Ta-ta has missed you awfully," I went on; "she told me yesterday that you never take her out on the hills now, and that her digestion is suffering in consequence. She says her tail is losing all its old grand sweep for want of change of air."

Babiole smoothed the dog's coat affectionately.

"I haven't been out much lately," she said in a low voice; "there has been a great deal to do in the cottage, and here too. I've been hemming some curtains for Janet, and helping mamma to make pickles. Oh, I've been very busy, indeed."

"And I suppose all this amazing superabundance of work is over at last, since you can find time to come and pay calls of ceremony on chance acquaintances."

She looked up at me reproachfully. My spirits had been rising ever since she came in, and I would only laugh at her.

"I'm sure it is quite time those curtains were hemmed and those pickles were made, so that you can have a chance to go back to Craigendarroch and look about for those roses you've left there."

"Roses! Oh, do I look white then?" And she began to rub her cheeks with her hands to hide the blush that rose to them.

"Has your mother said anything to you about Aberdeen and the music lessons?"

"Yes." She looked up with a loving smile.

I had turned my chair round to the fireplace, where a little glimmer of fire was burning; for it was a wet cool day Babiole had seated herself on a high cloth-covered footstool, and Ta-ta sat between us, looking from the one to the other and wagging her tail to congratulate us on our return to the old terms of friendship. The sky outside was growing lighter towards evening, and the sun was peeping out in a tearful and shamefaced way from behind the rain-clouds. The girl and the sun together had made a great illumination in the old study, though they were not at their brightest.

"Well, and how do you like the idea?"

"It is quite perfect, like all your ideas for making other people happy."

"I'm afraid I don't always succeed very well."

This she took as a direct accusation, and she bent her head very low away from me.

"Has your mother been talking to you, Babiole?"

"Yes"—as a guilty admission.

"What did she say?"

"Oh, she talked and talked. That was why I didn't like to come and see you. You see, though I told her she didn't understand, and that whatever you thought must be right, yet hearing all those things made me feel that I—I couldn't come in the old way. And then at last I missed you so—that I thought I would dash in and—get it over."

From which I gathered that Mrs. Ellmer had babbled out the old substance of our interview, and coloured it according to her lights, so I ventured:

"Didn't you feel at all angry with me for something I said—something I did?"

A pause. I could see nothing of her face, for she was most intent upon making a beautifully straight parting with my ink-stained old ivory paper-knife down the back of Ta-ta's head.

"I had no right to be angry," she said at last, in a quivering voice, "and besides—I am afraid—that what you said will come true."

And the tears began to fall upon her busy fingers. I put my hand very gently upon her brown hair and could feel the thrill sent through her whole frame by a valiant struggle to repress an outburst of grief.

"You are afraid then that——" And I waited.

"That he will never think of me again," she

sobbed; and unable any longer to repress her feelings, she sat at my feet for some minutes quietly crying.

I hoped that the distress which could find this childlike outlet would be only a transient one, and I thought it best for her to let her tears flow unrestrainedly, as I was sure she had no chance of doing under the sharp maternal eyes. I continued to smooth her hair sympathetically until by a great effort she conquered herself and dried her eyes.

"I am a great baby," she said indignantly; "as if I could hope that a very clever accomplished man, whom all the world is talking about, would be able to remember an ignorant girl like me, when once he had got back to London."

"Well, and you must pull yourself together and forget him," I said—I hope not savagely.

But there came a great change over her face, and she said almost solemnly—

"No, I don't want to do that—even if I could. I want to remember all he told me about art, and about ideals, and to become an accomplished woman, so that I may meet him some day, and he may be quite proud that it was he who inspired me."

So Mr. Scott had known how, by a little dash and plausibility, and by deliberately playing upon her emotions, to crown my work and to appropriate to himself the credit and the reward of it all.

But after this enthusiastic declaration the light faded again out of her sensitive face.

"It seems such a long, long time to wait before that can happen," she said mournfully.

And a remarkably poor ambition to live upon, I thought to myself.

"And do you think Mr. Scott's approbation is worth troubling your head about if, after all his enthusiasm about you, he forgets you as soon as you are out of his sight?" I asked rather bitterly.

Cut at this suggestion, corresponding so exactly with her own fears, she almost broke down again. It was in a broken voice that she answered—

"I can't think hardly about him; when I do it only makes me break my heart afterwards, and I long to see him to ask his pardon for being so harsh. He was fond of me while he was here, I couldn't expect more than that of such a clever man. And he has sent me one letter—and perhaps—I hope—he will send me another before long."

"He has written to you?"

"Yes." As a mark of deep friendship for me she not only let me see the envelope (preserved in a black satin case embroidered with pink silk) but flourished before my eyes the precious letter itself, a mere scrap of a note, I could see that, and not the ten-pager of your disconsolate lover.

I was seized with a great throb of impatience, and clave the top coal of the small fire viciously. She must get over this. I turned the subject, for fear I should wound her feelings by some outburst of anger against Mr. Scott, who must indeed have worked sedulously to leave such a deep impression on the girl's mind.

"Well, you will have to be content with your old master's affection for the present, Babiole," I said, when she had put her treasure carefully away.

"Oh, Mr. Maude!" She leant lovingly against my knee.

"And if the worst comes to the worst you will have to marry me."

She laughed as if this were a joke in my best manner.

"Didn't your mother say anything to you about that?" I asked, as if carrying on the jest.

Babiole blushed. "Don't talk about it," she said humbly. "I lost my temper and spoke disrespectfully to her for the first time. I told her she ought to be ashamed of herself, after all you have done for us."

Evidently she thought the idea originated with her mother, and was pressed upon me against my inclination. Seeing that I should gain nothing by undeceiving her, I laughed the matter off, and we drifted into a talk about the garden, and the croup among Mr. Blair's bare-footed children at the Mill o' Sterrin a mile away.

According to all precedent among love-lorn maidens, Babiole ought to have got over her love malady as a child gets over the measles, or else she ought to have dwindled into "the mere shadow of her former self" and to have found a refined consolation in her beloved hills. But instead of following either of these courses, the little maid began to evince more and more the signs of a marked change, which showed itself chiefly in an inordinate thirst for work of every kind. She began by a renewed and feverish devotion to her studies with me, and assiduous practice on my piano whenever I was out, to get the fullest possible benefit from her music lessons at Aberdeen. This, I thought, was only the outcome of her expressed desire to become an accomplished woman. But shortly afterwards she relieved her

mother of the whole care of the cottage, filling up her rare intervals of time in helping Janet. Walks were given up, with the exception of a short duty-trot each day to Knock Castle or the Mill o' Sterrin and back again. When I remonstrated, telling her she would lose her health, she answered restlessly—

"Oh, I hate walking, it is more tiring than all the work—much more tiring! And one gets as much air in the garden as on Craigendarroch, without catching cold."

She was always perfectly sweet and good with me, but she confessed to me sometimes, with tears in her eyes, that she was growing impatient and irritable with her mother. I had waited as eagerly as the girl herself for another letter from Fabian Scott, but when the hope of receiving one had died away, I did not dare to say anything about the sore subject.

About the middle of December she broke down. It was only a cold, she said, that kept her in the cottage and even forced her to lay aside all her incessant occupations. But she had worked so much too hard lately that she was not strong enough to throw it off quickly, and day after day, when I went to see her, I found my dear witch lying back in the high wooden rocking-chair in the sitting-room, with a very transparent-looking skin, a poor little pink-tipped nose, and large luminous, sad eyes that had no business at all in such a young face.

On the fifth day I was alone with her, Mrs. Ellmer having fussed off to the kitchen about dinner. I was in a very sentimental mood indeed, having missed my little sunbeam frightfully Babiole had pushed her rocking-chair quickly away from the table, which was covered with a map and a heap of old play-bills. By

the map lay a pencil, which the girl had laid down on my entrance.

"What were you doing when I came in?" I asked after a few questions about her health.

The colour came back for a moment to her face as she answered:

"I was tracing our old journeys together, mamma's and mine; and looking at those old play-bills with her name in them."

The occupation seemed to me dismally suggestive.

"You were wishing you were travelling again, I suppose," said I, in a tone which fear caused to sound hard.

"Oh no, at least not exactly," said the poor child, not liking to confess the feverish longing for change and movement which had seized upon her like a disease.

I remained silent for a few minutes, struggling with hard facts, my hands clasped together, my arms resting on my knees. Then I said without moving, in a voice that was husky in spite of all my efforts:

"Babiole, tell me, on your word of honour, are you thinking about that man still?"

I could hear her breath coming in quick sobs. Then she moved, and her fingers held out something right under my averted eyes. It was the one note she had received from Fabian Scott, worn into four little pieces.

"Look here, dear," I said, having signified by a bend of the head that I understood, "do you think a man like that would be likely to make a good husband?"

"Oh no," readily and sadly.

"But you would be his wife all the same?"

"Oh, Mr. Maude!" in a low trembling voice, as if Paradise had been suddenly thrown open to mortal sight.

I got up.

"Well, well," I said, trying to speak in a jesting tone, "I suppose these things will be explained in a better world!"

Mrs. Ellmer came in at that moment, and the leave-taking for the day was easier.

"Won't you stay and lunch with us, Mr. Maude? I've just been preparing something nice for you," she said with disappointment.

"Thank you, no, I can't stay this morning. The fact is I have to start for London this afternoon, and I haven't a minute to lose."

Babiole started, and her eyes, as I turned to her to shake hands, shone like stars.

"Good-bye, Mr. Maude," she faltered, taking my hand in both hers, and pressing it feverishly.

And she looked into my face without any inquiry in her gaze, but with a subdued hope and a boundless gratitude.

Mrs. Ellmer insisted on coming over to the house to see that everything was properly packed for me. As I left the cottage with her I looked back, and saw the little face, with its weird expression of eagerness, pressed against the window.

It was an awful thing I was going to do, certainly. But what sacrifice would not the worst of us make to preserve the creature we love best in the world from dying before our eyes?

CHAPTER XVII.

I ARRIVED at King's Cross at 8.15 on the following morning, and after breakfasting at the Midland Hotel, went straight to Fabian Scott's chambers, in a street off the Haymarket. It was then a little after half-past ten.

Fabian, who was at breakfast, received me very heartily, and was grieved that I had not come direct to him.

"What would you have said" he asked, "if I had gone to have breakfast at the Invercauld Arms in Ballater, instead of coming on to you?"

"That's not quite the same thing, my impetuous young friend. You didn't expect me, for one thing, and London is a place where one must be a little more careful of one's behaviour than in the wilds."

"No, that is true, I did not expect you; though when I heard your name, I was so pleased I thought I must have been living on the expectation for the last month."

"Out of sight, out of mind, according to the simple old saying."

I was looking about me, examining my friend's surroundings, feeling discouraged by the portraits of beautiful women, photographs on the mantelpiece, paintings on the walls, the invitation cards stuck in the looking-glass, the crested envelopes, freshly torn, on the table; the room, which seemed effeminately luxurious, after my sombre, threadbare, old study,

gave no evidence of bachelor desolation. It was just untidy enough to prove that "when a man's single he lives at his ease," for an opera hat and a soiled glove lay on the chair, a new French picture, which a wife would have tabooed, was propped up against the back of another, and on the mantelpiece was a royal disorder, in which a couple of pink clay statuettes of pierrettes, by Van der Straeten, showed their piquant, high-hatted little heads, and their befrilled, high-lifted little skirts above letters, ash trays, cigarette cases, "parts" in MS., sketches, a white tie, a woman's long glove, the "proof" of an article on "The Cathedrals of Spain," and a heap of other things. In the centre stood a handsome Chippendale clock, surmounted by signed photographs of Sarah Bernhardt and a much admired Countess. Fresh hot-house flowers filled two delicate Venetian glass vases on the table, long-leaved green plants stood in the windows. I began to suspect that the feminine influence in Fabian Scott's life was strong enough already, and I felt that any idea of an appeal to a bachelor's sense of loneliness must straightway be given up. There was another point, however, on which I felt more sanguine. Fabian had no private means, his tastes were evidently expensive, and he had had no engagement since the summer. Having made up my mind that to marry my little Babiole to this man was the only thing to restore her to health and hope (about happiness I could but be doubtful), I could not afford to shrink from the means.

I had been listening with one ear to Fabian, who never wanted much encouragement to talk. He treated me to a long monologue on the low ebb to which art of all kinds had sunk in England, to the prevailing taste for burlesque in literature, and on the

stage, and for "Little Toddlekins" on the walls of picture galleries.

"I thought burlesque had gone out," I suggested.

He turned upon me fiercely, having finished his breakfast, and being occupied in striding up and down the room.

"Not at all," he said emphatically. "What is farcical comedy but burlesque of the most vicious kind? Burlesque of domestic life, throwing ridicule on virtuous wives and jealous husbands, making heroes and heroines of men and women of loose morals? What is melodrama but burlesque of incidents and of passions, fatiguing to the eye and stupefying to the intellect? I repeat, art in England is a dishonoured corpse, and the man who dares to call himself an artist, and to talk about his art with any more reverence than a grocer feels for his sanded sugar, or a violin-seller for his sham Cremonas, is treated with the derision one would show to a modern Englishman who should fall down and worship a mummy."

All which, being interpreted, meant that Mr. Fabian Scott saw no immediate prospect of an engagement good enough for his deserts.

"Well, even if art is in a bad way, artists still seem to rub on very comfortably," I said, glancing round the room.

Fabian swept the place with a contemptuous glance from right to left, as if it had been an ill-kept stable.

"One finds a corner to lay one's head in, of course," he admitted disdainfully; "but even that may be gone to-morrow," he added darkly, plunging one hand into a suggestive heap of letters and papers on a side table as he passed it.

"Bills?" I asked cheerfully.

He gave me a tragic nod and strode on.

"You should marry," I ventured boldly, "some girl with seven or eight hundred a year, for instance, with a little love of art on her own account to support yours."

Fabian stopped in front of me with his arms folded. He was the most unstagey actor on the stage, and the stagiest off I ever met. He gave a short laugh, tossing back his head.

"A girl with seven hundred a year marry *me*, an *artist!* My dear fellow, you have been in Sleepy Hollow too long. You form your opinions of life on the dark ages."

"No I don't," I said very quietly "I know a girl with eight hundred a year, who likes you well enough to marry you if you were to ask her."

"These rapid modern railway journeys— A heavy breakfast—with perhaps a glass of cognac on an empty stomach"—murmured Fabian softly, gazing at me with kindly compassion.

"She is seventeen, the daughter of an artist, an artist herself by every instinct. Her name is Babiole Ellmer," I went on composedly.

Fabian started.

"Babiole Ellmer! Pretty little Babiole!" he cried, with affectionate interest at once apparent in his manner; "but," he hesitated and flushed slightly, "I don't understand. The little girl—dear little thing she was, I remember her quite well, with her coquettish Scotch cap and her everlasting blushes. She was no heiress then, certainly."

A bitter little thought of the different manner in which he would have treated her in that case crossed

my mind. "I've adopted her. I allow her eight hundred a year during my life, and of course afterwards——"

I nodded; he nodded. It was all understood. Fabian had grown suddenly quiet and thoughtful, and I knew that Babiole had gained her precious admirer's heart. He liked her, that was my comfort, my excuse. His face had lighted up at the remembrance of her, and as she would bring with her an income large enough to prevent his being even burdened with her maintenance, I felt that I was heaping upon his head too much joy for a mortal to deserve, and that he accepted it more kindly than was meet. It is a curious experience to have to be thankful to see another person receive, almost with indifference, a prize for which one would gladly have given twenty years of life.

"She is a most beautiful and charming girl," he said, after a pause, in a new tone of respect. Eight hundred a year and "expectations" put such a splendid mantle of dignity on the shoulders of a little wild damsel in a serge frock. "Do you know, I thought, Harry, you would end by marrying her yourself!"

I only laughed and said, oh no, I was a confirmed bachelor. But it was in my mind to tell him how much obliged I felt for his contribution towards my domestic felicity.

I presently said that I had some business to transact, that I had to pay a visit to my lawyer. This young man's complacent beatitude since he had discovered a not unpleasant way out of his difficulties was beginning to jar upon me furiously. So we made an appointment for the evening, and I took myself off.

When I made my excuse to Fabian I really had some idea in my mind of calling upon a solicitor and having a deed drawn up, settling £800 a year on Babiole. But I reflected, as soon as I was alone, that I should make a better guardian than the law, and that I should do as well to keep control over her allowance. I would alter my will on her wedding-day, just as I must have done if it had been my own. A trace of cowardice strengthened this resolution, for I look upon a visit to a lawyer much as I do upon a visit to a dentist, with this difference, that the latter really does sometimes relieve you of your pain, while the former relieves you of nothing but your money.

So I found myself wandering about my old haunts, glancing up at the windows of clubs of which I had once been a member, and feeling a strong desire to enter their doors once more, and see what change eight years had brought about in my old acquaintances. I had long ago lost all acute sensitiveness about my own altered appearance; there was so very little in common between the "Handsome Harry" of twenty-four and the scarred gray-haired backwoodsman of thirty-two, that I looked upon them as two distinct persons, and I remained for a few moments confounded by my exceeding astonishment, when a familiar voice cried, "Hallo, Maude!" and I found my hand in the grasp of an important-looking gentleman, who, as a slim lad, had been one of my constant companions. He now represented a small Midland town in Parliament, in the Conservative interest, seemed amazed that I had not heard of his speech in favour of increasing the incomes of bishops, and confided to me his hopes of getting an appointment in the Foreign Office when "his party" came

into power again. I said I hoped he would, but I inwardly desired that it might not be a post of great responsibility, for I found my friend addle-pated to an extent I had never dreamed of in the old days, when we backed the same horses and loved the same ladies. He insisted on taking me into the Carlton, where I met some more of the old set, who all seemed glad to see me, but with whom I now felt curiously out of sympathy. It was not so much that my politics had veered round, as that, living an independent and isolated life, I was not bound to hold fast to traditions and prejudices, like these men who were in the thick of the fight. I had gone into the club seeking distraction from my thoughts, trying to re-awaken my old sympathies. I went out again after an hour of animated and friendly talk with my acquaintances of eight years ago, more solitary, more isolated than ever. Yet when they had tried to persuade me to come back to life again, being all of opinion that existence by one's self in the Highlands was tantamount to a state of suspended animation, I had answered it was not unlikely that I might do so.

For the game must be carried on still when Babiole was married ; but not with the old rules.

I had another interview with Fabian that evening, for we dined at the Criterion together. It was arranged that he should spend Christmas at Larkhall with me, and it was tacitly understood that he would use this opportunity of assuring Miss Ellmer that her image had never been absent from his mind, and that he could have no rest until she had promised to become his wife at an early date.

I left King's Cross by the nine o'clock train that night, having decided on this course suddenly, when

I found I was in too restless a mood to be able to get either sleep or entertainment in London. Arriving at Aberdeen at 2.15 on the following afternoon, I caught the three o'clock train to Ballater, and got to Larkhall before six. It was quite dark by that time, and the lamp was shining through the blind of the sitting-room window at the cottage. I knocked at the door, which was opened by Babiole; she held a candle in her left hand, and by its light I saw her eyes and cheeks were burning with excitement.

"I knew your knock," she said tremulously, as she gave me a hot dry hand, "though I did not expect you so soon."

Here Mrs. Ellmer rushed out of the sitting-room, fell upon me, and insisted upon my sitting down to tea with them.

"And how have you been since I left?" I said to the girl.

"Don't ask, Mr. Maude," interrupted her mother. "I'm sure you would have felt flattered if you could have seen her. She's been just like a wild bird in a cage, never still for two minutes, and half the time with her face glued to the window, cold as it is; as if that would make you come back any faster."

Babiole hung her head; she may have blushed, poor child, but her cheeks had been so hot and burning ever since my entrance, that no deepening of their colour could be noticed. I concluded that she had given no hint to her mother of her surmises concerning the object of my journey.

"Well," said I, "leading such solitary lives as we do up here, of course the absence of one person makes a great difference. In fact, my own solitude has begun to prey upon me so much, that—that I

rushed up to London to try to find a friend to spend Christmas up here, and make things livelier for us all."

"Well," said Mrs. Ellmer, "that is an idea, to be sure. I confess I have been eaten up with wonder at your going suddenly off like that, and have been guessing myself quite silly as to the reason of it."

"And did Babiole guess too?" I asked lightly, looking at the girl, who sat very quietly, with her eyes fixed upon my face.

"Oh no, she has given up all such childish amusements as that," said Mrs. Ellmer rather sadly. "There would never be so much as a laugh to be heard in the place now if I didn't keep up my spirits."

"Well, she must open her mouth now, at any rate. Now, Babiole, can you guess who it is who is coming to spend Christmas with us?"

In an instant the strained expression left her face, a great light flashed into her eyes, and seemed to irradiate every feature.

"I think you have guessed," said I gently.

She got up quickly and opened the sideboard, as if looking for something; but I think, from the attitude of her bent head, and from the solemn peace that was on her face when she returned to us, that she had followed her first impulse to breathe a silent thanksgiving to God.

"Will you have some quince-marmalade, Mr. Maude?" she asked, as she came back to the table with a little glass dish in her hand.

And she leaned over my shoulder to help me to the preserve, while her mother, who had guessed with great glee the name of my Christmas visitor, was still

overflowing with exultation at the great news. For she did not once doubt the object of his coming, which, indeed I had suggested by a delicate archness in which I took some pride.

Shortly after tea I rose to go, being tired out with my two rapid and sleepless journeys. Mrs. Ellmer bade me good-night with kind concern for my fatigue.

"Indeed, I don't think travelling agrees with you, or else you tried to do too much in your short visit, for you look drawn, and worn, and ill, and ten years older than when you started," she said solicitously.

"Yes, I'm getting too old for dissipation," I said lightly.

Babiole was standing by the door; she was watching me affectionately, and had evidently some private and particular communication to make to me, by the impatience with which she rattled the door-handle. At last I had shaken hands with Mrs. Ellmer and had got out into the passage. The girl shut the room door quickly and threw herself upon my arm, giving at last free rein to her excitement and passionate gratitude. The gaze of her pure eyes, shining, not with earthly passion, but with the ecstatic light of a dying saint, who sees the heavens opening to receive him, struck a new fear into my heart. The happiness this child-woman looked for was something which Fabian Scott, artist though he was, with splendid verbal aspirations and chivalrous devotions, would not even understand. As she poured forth soft whispering thanks for my goodness—she knew it was all my doing, she said: she had even guessed beforehand what I was going to do—I felt my eyes grow moist and my voice husky.

"My child," I whispered back, "don't thank me. It hurts me, for I am not sure that I am not bringing upon you a great and terrible misfortune."

"Don't be afraid," she said, shaking her head with that far-off look in her eyes which told so plainly that she saw into a life which could not be lived on earth; "you think I am romantic, fanciful; that I expect more from this man than his love can ever give me. Oh, but you don't know," and she looked straight up into my face, with that piercing dreamy earnestness that made her see, not the yearning tenderness of the eyes into which she looked, but only the kind guardian's mind to be convinced. "You don't know how well I understand. He would never have thought of me again if you had not gone to him and said—I don't know what, but just the thing you knew would touch him, with pity or with pride that a poor little girl could love him so." I almost shivered at the dreary distance which lay between this surmise and the truth. "But I don't mind; I know that I love him so much, that when he knows and feels what I would do for him, it will make him happy. You know," she went on more earnestly still, "it isn't for him to love me that I have been craving and praying all this time, it was for a sight of his face, or for a letter that he had written himself with his own hand."

She took my sympathy with her for granted now, and poured this confession out to me quite simply, feeling sure that I understood, as indeed I did to my cost. But after this I thought it wise to try to calm down this exultation of feeling, by certain grandmotherly platitudes about the difficulties of married life, the disillusions one had to suffer, the forbearance one had to show, to all of which she listened very

submissively and well, but with an evident conviction that she knew quite as much about the matter as I did. Then I bade her good-night, and she stood in the porch, wrapt up in her plaid, until I had reached my own door, for I heard her clear young voice sing out a last "good-night" as I went in.

Poor little girl! She could not know how her gratitude cut me to the heart.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ten days before Christmas we spent on the whole happily. Mrs. Ellmer burst into tears on my informing her of the allowance I proposed to make to her daughter, and sobbed out hysterically, "My own child to be able to keep a carriage! Oh! if poor mamma could have known!"

This announcement, when made to Babiole by her mother, was the one drawback to her happiness. She implored me to change my mind, little guessing, poor child, what other change that would have involved. I was very angry with Mrs. Ellmer for spoiling the girl's perfect bliss by this vulgar detail, which it had been necessary to impart to the mother, but which I had particularly desired to withhold for the present from the daughter's more sensitive ears. I had hard work to comfort her, but I succeeded at last by reminding her that she was under my guardianship, and that it was my pride to see my ward cut a handsome figure in the world.

I almost think, if it does not sound far-fetched to say so, that the girl enjoyed those ten days with me, prattling about her lover and endowing him with gifts

of beauty and nobility and wisdom which neither he nor any man I ever met possessed, more than the fortnight of feverish joy in his actual presence which followed. Not that Fabian was disappointing as a *fiancé*; far from it. He had the gift of falling into raptures easily, and he fell in love with his destined bride as promptly as heart could desire. But the imaginative quality, which formed so important a feature of the young girl's romantic passion, caused her at first to shrink from his vehement caresses as at a blow to her ideal, while on the other hand the light touch of his fingers would send a convulsive shiver through her whole frame.

How did I know all this? I can scarcely tell. And yet it is true, and I learnt it early in Fabian's short visit. As the savage knows the signs of the sky, so did I, living by myself, study to some purpose the gentle nature whose smiles made my happiness.

When Fabian left us at the end of a fortnight, it was settled that the wedding was to take place in six weeks' time at Newcastle. I had a prejudice against my ward's being married in Scotland, where I conceived rightly or wrongly, that a certain looseness of the marriage-tie prevailed. On the other hand I would not let her go to London to be married, being of opinion that such a bride was worth a journey. So Mrs. Ellmer having some relations at Newcastle, she and her daughter spent there the three weeks immediately preceding the ceremony. I missed them dreadfully during those three weeks, and was not without a vague hope somewhere down in the depths of my heart that something unforeseen might happen to prevent the marriage. But when I arrived at the castle on the evening before the appointed day,

Fabian was already there, everybody was in the highest spirits; and Mrs. Ellmer's Newcastle cousins, rather proud of the position in "society" which they were assured the bride was going to hold, had undertaken to provide a handsome wedding breakfast.

I gave her away next morning, in the old church with its crowned tower which they now call a cathedral. I think perhaps she guessed something more than I would have had her know in the vestry when the service was over, when I asked her for a kiss and fell a-trembling as she granted it; at any rate she turned very white and grave in the midst of her happiness, and thenceforth dropped her voice to a humble half-whisper whenever she spoke to me. She had been married in her travelling dress, an innovation rather alarming to Newcastle; but she looked so pretty in her first silk gown—a dark brown—and in the long sealskin mantle that had been my wedding present, that I think some of the damsels at the breakfast decided that this fashion was one to be followed.

The bride and bridegroom left us early, more, I think, because Fabian found both breakfast and speeches heavy than because there was any need to hurry for the train. I having no such excuse, and being treated as a great personage with a Monte-Christo-like habit of dowering marriageable maidens, was forced to remain. I made a speech, I forget what about, which was received with laughter and enthusiasm. The only things I remember about the people were the strong impression of dull and commonplace provincialism which their speech and manner made upon me, and that on the other hand, a little quiet maiden of seventeen or so, who wore a

very rusty frock and was awkwardly shy, astonished me by quoting Tacitus in the original, and proved to be quite an appallingly learned person.

When I could get away I bade farewell to Mrs. Ellmer, who touched my heart by crying over my departure. She had made arrangements to stay in Newcastle with an aunt who was getting old, and who felt inclined for the cheap charity of discharging her servant and taking the active and industrious little woman to live with her. Mrs. Ellmer was to take care of Ta-ta till my return. Outside the door Ferguson met me with my old portmanteau ready on a cab. In five minutes I was off on my travels again.

I was out of England altogether for four years, during which, among other little expeditions, I traversed America from the southern-most point of Terra del Fuego to the land of the Eskimos. I heard nothing of Babiole or her husband, nor did I make any efforts to hear anything about them, being of opinion that a man and his wife settle down to life together best without any of that outside interference which it is so difficult for those who love them to withhold, when they see things going amiss with the young household. At the end of four years, I had said to myself, they will have obtained a rudimentary knowledge of each other's character. Babiole will be a woman and will no longer see the reflex of the divinity in any man ; the experiment of marriage will be in working order, and one will be able to judge the results. I had not forgotten them, indeed I had thought of them continually. I had taken care that Babiole's allowance was regularly paid; but my second sentimental disappointment having found me

some sort of a misanthrope, had cured me of my misanthropy ; and a freer intercourse with men and women, and a particular study of such married couples as I met convinced me that the mutual attraction of man and woman towards each other is so great that merely negative qualities in the one sex count as virtues in the eyes of the other, and that a husband and wife who will only abstain from being actively disagreeable to one another are in a fair way towards attaining a gentle mutual enthusiasm which will make the grayest of human lives seem fair. Now Babiole could never be actively disagreeable to anybody ; and surely not even a disappointed artist, and no artist is so disappointed as he who is all but the most successful, could be actively disagreeable to Babiole.

But my philosophy had weak points, which I was soon abruptly to discover.

It was in the month of March that I came back to England and put up at the Bedford Hotel, Covent Garden. Fabian and his wife lived in a flat at Bayswater, the address of which I had taken care to obtain. Although I was much excited at the thought of seeing them, I was by no means anxious to anticipate the meeting, which I had decided should not take place until tailor and hatter and hair-dresser had done their best to remove all traces of barbarism. My beard I had decided to retain, but it must be now the beard of Bond Street, and not that of the prairies. In the meantime I took a solitary stall at the theatre where Fabian was playing, with some vague idea of gaining a premonitory insight into the course of his matrimonial career.

A keen sensation of something which I regret to

say was not wholly disappointment shot through me as I perceived that, so far from having acquired any touch of the comfortable and commonplace which is the outward and visible sign of an inward domestic tranquillity, Fabian was leaner, more haggard than ever. He had grown more petulant and irritable, too, as I gathered from his annoyance with a large and lively party of very well dressed people who sat in one of the boxes nearest the stage, and who, without transgressing such lax bonds of good breeding as usually control the occupants of stalls and boxes, evidently found more entertainment in each other than in the people on the stage.

I glanced up at the box, following instinctively the direction of Fabian's eyes, and saw an ugly but clever-looking young man very much occupied with a pale sad-faced lady; two very young men and two other ladies, both with the dead-white complexions and black dresses which have been of late so popular with the half world and its imitators, formed the rest of the occupants.

Before the end of the first scene in which he was engaged, Fabian had recognised me, and in the pause between the acts a note from him was brought to me by one of the attendants asking me to "go and speak to Babiole, and to come home to supper with them."

Speak to Babiole! Why, then, she must be in the theatre! I got up and peered about with my glasses; but though I could see well into every part of the house, I could discover no one in the least like my little witch of the hills. After a careful inspection, I decided that she must be one of three or four ladies who were hidden by the curtains of the boxes in which they sat. In this belief I had resumed my seat

and given up the search when, just as the curtain was rising upon the next act, and I glanced up again at the people who had excited Fabian's wrath, a look, a movement of the pale sad-looking lady suddenly attracted my attention. I raised my glasses again in consternation ; for, changed as she was, with all her pretty colour faded, the bright light gone from her eyes, the soft outlines of her little face altered and sharpened, there was now no possibility of mistaking the melancholy and listless lady who was still absorbing the attention of the clever-looking man beside her for any other than my old pupil.

Through the remaining two acts of the piece I scarcely dared to look at her ; everything seemed to indicate the total failure of the match I had made. I wanted to escape for that night any further indictment than my fears brought against me, but I was scarcely outside the theatre after the performance when a hand was laid upon my shoulder in the crowd, and Fabian, who had hurried round to meet me, led me back into the building and presented me to his wife. The young fellow who had been so devoted in the box was with her still, together with one of the ladies in black. Fabian's manner to me was as emphatically cordial as ever, and showed no trace of a grievance against me ; but Babiole's was utterly changed. She was talking to her companion when she first caught sight of me, as I passed through the swinging doors with her husband, and made my way toward her among footmen and plush-enveloped ladies. The words she was uttering suddenly froze on her lips, and the last vestige of colour left her pale face as if at some sight at least as horrible as unexpected. Before I reached her she had recovered

herself, however, and was holding out her hand, not indeed with the old frank pleasure, but with a very gracious conventional welcome.

"Fancy, my dear," said Fabian, "the villain has been in the country two whole days without thinking of calling upon us. These sneaking ways must be punished upon the spot, and I pronounce therefore that he be immediately seized and carried off to supper."

I protested that I was too tired to do anything but fall asleep.

"Well, you can fall asleep at our place just as well as at yours. And that reminds me that you had better sleep there. We've plenty of room, and we can send the boy for your things."

"Thanks. It's awfully kind of you, Scott, but I couldn't do that, I have an appointment at——"

"There that second excuse spoils it all. A first excuse may awaken only incredulity, a second inevitably rouses contempt. You shall sleep where you like, but you must sup with us."

"You will bring Mr. Maude with you in a hansom, then, Fabian," said his wife, who had not joined in the discussion, "for Mrs. Capel is coming with me."

Fabian, who had been only coldly civil to Mrs. Capel, the lady in black, looked annoyed, but had to acquiesce in these arrangements. We saw the ladies into the brougham, Fabian gave a curt good-night to the clever-looking young man, and then we jumped into a hansom and drove towards Bayswater.

I confess I wished myself at the other end of the world, especially as I began to think that, while my hostess certainly was not anxious for my society, my host was chiefly actuated in his obstinate hospitality

by the desire to show that he bore me no malice. Thus when he congratulated me on being still a bachelor it was in such a magnanimous tone that I found myself forced to express a hope that he did not envy me my freedom.

"I must not say that I do," said he, with more magnanimity than ever. "Still it is but frank to own that personal experience of marriage has confirmed my previous convictions instead of reversing them. In short, to put it plainly, I found soon after my marriage, as all men in my position must sooner or later find, that I had to choose between being my wife's ideal of a good husband or my own ideal of a good artist. I found that a good woman is twice as exacting as a divine Art; for while Art only demands the full and free exercise of your working faculties in her service, a woman insists on the undivided empire of your very thoughts, she must have a full, true, and particular account of your dreams; you must not run, jump, sneeze, or cough but in her honour."

"And you chose the Art, I suppose," I said, trying not to speak coldly

"My dear boy, I really had no choice. Babiole and I each wanted a slave; but while I demanded a fellow-slave in the labours of my life, this pretty little lady only wished for a human footstool for her pretty little feet."

"But I cannot understand. Babiole was always as submissive as a lamb, a dog, anything you like that is gentle and docile."

"My dear Maude, at the time you speak of she was unwedded. Now just as the horse, in himself a noble animal, corrupts and depraves every man with whom he comes in contact, from the groom to the jockey, so

does intercourse with man, the king of creatures, speedily destroy in woman all the traces of those good qualities with which, in deference to the poets, we will concede her to have been originally endowed."

"I know nothing about that," said I bluntly, "but if Babiole Ellmer has been anything short of a perfectly true-hearted wife, I will stake my solemn oath that she has been harnessed to a damned bad husband."

I was cold and wet with overmastering indignation, or I should not have blurted out my opinion so coarsely. Fabian was on fire directly, gesticulating with his hands, glaring with his eyes, in his old impulsive style.

"Do you mean to accuse me of telling you lies? Do you mean to insinuate that I have not treated your ward as a gentleman should treat his wife, especially when she is the adopted daughter of his best friend? Do you think I should dare to look you in the face if I had failed in my duty towards her?"

"If you were one of the 'common rabble of humanity' you despise so much, I should tell you you had failed in your duty very much. As you belong to a clique which considers itself above such rules, I tell you frankly that Art wouldn't suffer a jot if you did neglect her, while this poor child does; and that if you were to act like Garrick, write like Shakespeare, and paint like Raphael, it wouldn't excuse you for the change between your wife on her wedding day and your wife to-night."

"You are very severe," said Fabian, who was shaking with excitement and passion. "If you are really so lost to a man's common sense as to take it

for granted already that the fault is all on one side, you must pardon me if I set your remarks down to the ravings of infatuation."

There was a pause. This thrust told, for indeed a great wave of bitter and passionate regret at the loss beyond recall of my pretty witch of the hills was drowning my calmer reason and making me rude and savage beyond endurance. We had just self-control enough left to remain silent for the remaining few minutes of the drive, both quaking with rage, and both ashamed, I of my explosion, he, I hope, of the lameness of his explanations. The hansom stopped at the mansions, on the third floor of one of which Mr. and Mrs. Scott lived. I jumped out first, raised my hat, and excusing myself coldly and formally, was hurrying away, when Fabian, regardless of the cabman, who thought it was a dodge, and hallooed after him, followed me at a run, put his arm through mine, and dragged me back again.

"Can't quarrel with you, Harry," he said affectionately, "Say it's all my fault if you like, but hear both sides first. Come in, come in I tell you."

And having given vent to his feelings in a volley of eloquent abuse to the shouting cabman, he tossed him his fare and led me into the house.

Curiously enough, the emotion which seemed to choke me as I mounted the stairs and stood outside the door of Babiole's home, disappeared entirely as soon as the door opened to admit us. For there, standing in the little entrance hall, at the open door of the drawing-room, was the slim pale lady with pleasant conventional manners, and the pretty little meaningless laugh of a desire to please. We followed her into the room, which was charmingly furnished,

lighted by coloured lights, scented by foreign perfumes, and hung with drawings and engravings of which the mistress of the house was very proud. She was so lively and bright, criticised the piece in which her husband was playing so unmercifully, and said so many witty and amusing things during supper, that I forgot Babiole in Mrs. Scott, and was only recalled to remembrance of her identity by an occasional gesture or a tone of the voice. If I had not seen her in the theatre first I might have thought she was a happy wife, as, if I had not remembered the round rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes of the little maid of Craigendarroch, I might have admired the piquant delicacy of the small white face before me, in which the grey eyes looked abnormally large and dark.

After enjoying myself greatly, though not quite unreservedly, I had risen to take leave, when Fabian, suddenly remembering that he had some proofs to send off which were already overdue at a publisher's, asked me if I would mind waiting while he finished correcting them. It wouldn't take a minute. He had his hand upon the door which led from the dining-room to the little den he called his study, when his wife, in almost terror-struck entreaty, rushed towards him and begged him to leave it till next day.

"I can't, Bab; they must go by the first post, and you know very well I shan't be up in time to do them."

"I'll do them for you," she said eagerly.

"No, no, don't tease," said her husband authoritatively, "take Mr. Maude into the drawing-room and play him something," and he pushed her off and left the room.

She turned to me with a smiling shrug of the shoulders, and said playfully, "see what it is to be a down-trodden wife." Then, leading the way into the drawing-room, and seating herself at once at the piano, she dashed into a lively waltz air. But it suddenly occurred to me that she was possessed with some strange fear of being alone with me, and this idea broke the spell of her brilliant manner, and reduced me to shy and stupid silence.

CHAPTER XIX.

I HAD sat down in a low chair near the piano, and I remained looking at a rug under my feet as my hostess went on playing one bright piece after another with scarcely a pause between.

"I know very well," she said at last, "that you don't care for any of this music a bit. Men call it rubbish, and affect to despise it, just as they do high-heeled boots, dainty millinery, and lots of other pretty frivolous things."

"I don't despise it, I assure you. It is very inspiriting, at least—it would chime in well with one's feelings if one were in high spirits."

"Still I know you are ascribing my change of taste in music to a great moral deterioration. But listen——"

She broke off in a gavotte she was playing, and sang "Auld Robin Gray" so that every note seemed to strike on my heart. In the old time among the hills Babiole used to sing it to me, in a wild, sweet, bird-like voice that thrilled and charmed me, and made me call her my little tame nightingale; but the

song I heard now was not the same; there was a new ring in the pathos, a plaintive cry that seemed to reach my very soul; and I listened holding my breath.

When the last note was touched on the piano, I raised my head with an effort and looked at her; almost expecting, I believe, to see tears in her eyes. She was looking at me, curiously, with a very still face of grave inquiry. As she met my gaze she looked down at the keys, and began another waltz.

"Don't play any more," I said abruptly.

She stopped, and seeming for a moment rather embarrassed, began to turn over the leaves of a pile of music on a chair beside her.

"You have learnt to sing, I suppose," I said quietly. "You know I am a Goth in musical matters, but I can tell that."

"And of course you are going to tell me that my fresh untutored voice gave sweeter music than any singing-master could produce," said she, with almost spasmodic liveliness.

"Indeed I am not. Your singing to-night not only struck me as infinitely better than it used to be from a musician's point of view, but it expressed the sentiment of the song with a vividness that caused me acute pain."

I had risen from my seat, and was standing by the piano. She shot up at me one of her old looks, a child's shy appeal for indulgence.

"You have learnt a great deal since I saw you last; you have become the accomplished fascinating woman it was your ambition to be. I have never met any one more amusing."

"Yes," she said slowly; "I have fulfilled my ambi-

tion, I suppose." For a few minutes she remained busy with the leaves of the music, while I still watched her, and noticed how the plump healthy red hands of the mountain girl had dwindled into the slender white ones of the London lady. Then she leaned forward over the keyboard, and asked curiously, "Which do you like best, the little wild girl whom you used to teach, or the accomplished woman who amuses you?"

"I like them both, in quite a different way." If I am not mistaken her face fell. "To tell you the truth, I now find it hard to connect the two. I love the memory of the little wild girl who used to sit by my side, and make me think myself a very wise person by the eagerness with which she listened to me, while I laid down the law on all matters human and divine; and I have a profound admiration for the gracious lady whom I meet to-night for the first time."

"Admiration!" She repeated the word in a low voice, rather scornfully, touching the keys of the piano lightly, and looking at me with a dreary smile. Then she turned her head away, but not quickly enough to hide from me that her eyes were filling with tears.

A great thrill of pity and tenderness for the forlorn soul thus suddenly revealed drew me nearer to her, and I said, leaning towards the little bending figure:

"I did not mean to pain you, Babiole. You cannot think that, caring for you as I used to do as if you had been my own child, I have lost all feeling for you now."

She turned quickly towards me again, biting her under lip as she fixed her eyes wistfully, eagerly, upon

my face. Then with tears rolling down her cheeks, she laid her head on my arm, and clinging to my hand, to my sleeve, began to sob and to whisper incoherent words of gladness at my coming.

"My child, my child!" I said hoarsely, with a passionate yearning to comfort the fragile little creature whose whole body was trembling with repressed sobs. I got into a sort of frenzy as she went on helplessly crying, and eloquence soon ran dry in my efforts to comfort her. "Look here, child, this won't do any good. Hold up your head, Babiole; for goodness sake don't go on like this, my dear, or I shall be snivelling myself in a moment," I said, with more of the same matter-of-fact kind, until she presently looked up and laughed at me through her tears.

"There now, you've quite spoilt yourself by this nonsense," I continued severely. "Go and put yourself to rights before your husband comes in."

And I led her to the looking-glass with my arm round her, feeling, though I did not recognise the fact at the time, a great relief in this little demonstration of an affection which was growing every moment stronger.

"Do you know," she asked presently, as she turned her head away from the glass before which she had, by some dexterous feminine sleight of hand with two or three hairpins, arranged her disordered hair, "why Fabian had proofs to correct to-night?"

I confessed with shame that my male mind had been content with the reason he had given.

"He wanted to leave me alone with you," she explained, "because he knows what a strong influence you have over me, and he hoped that you would give me a lecture."

"A lecture! What did he want me to lecture on?"

"Oh, on my general conduct, I suppose; on my acquaintance, intimacy with people he dislikes; on my taking part in amateur theatricals; on a lot of things—on everything in fact."

"But if your husband can't induce you to do what he wishes, what chance have I, an outsider?"

"Oh, Mr. Maude, dear Mr. Maude, have you been so long among the hills as to think like that? Or is it that life was a different thing when you took an active part in it? It's only in books that husbands are husbands, and wives are wives."

She had sat down on the sofa beside me, but I was not going to be talked over like that. Her words had roused in me the instinctive antagonism of the sexes, and I got up and walked up and down, an occupation which demanded some care amidst the miniature inlaid furniture with which the small room was somewhat overcrowded.

"You know, my dear," I began rather drily, looking at the ceiling, which was not far above my head, "when things get so radically wrong between husband and wife, as they seem to be between you and Fabian, the fault is very seldom all on one side."

"But it is in this case."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, quite sure."

"You think you are not to blame in the least?"

"In this, no."

"And that all the fault lies on poor Fabian's side?"

"Oh, no."

"Well, on whose side does it lie then?"

"On yours."

I stopped short in front of her, and looked down on the little Dresden china figure, sitting with clasped hands and crossed feet in exasperating demureness on the sofa below me.

"Do you know that you are a confoundedly ungrateful little puss?"

"No, I'm not," she answered passionately, raising her head and meeting my gaze with eyes full of fire. "I think of you by day and by night. I read over the books I read with you, to try to feel as if you were still by my side explaining them to me. I talk to you when I am by myself, I sing my best songs to you. I almost pray to you. But just as the heathen beat their gods and throw them in the dust when they lose a battle, so I, when things go wrong with me, find a consolation in accusing you of being the cause." She laughed a little as she finished, as if ashamed of her temerity, and anxious to let it pass as a joke. But I held my ground and looked at her steadily.

"That is very flattering," said I, more moved than I cared to show, "but it is nothing in support of your accusation. Women, the very best of you, think nothing of bringing against your friends charges which a man——"

She interrupted hastily, "I brought no charge."

"You only accused me of deliberately spoiling the lives of two of my dearest friends."

"No, no, not that; I only said that you brought about our marriage."

"Which then seemed to you the climax of earthly happiness. Remember, you married him with your

eyes open, content not even to expect him to be a good husband. You admitted that yourself. Is it my fault that your love has proved a weaker thing than you thought?"

"Weaker!" This was apparently a new idea to her. She now spoke in a humbler tone. "How could I know," she asked meekly, "what strong things it would have to conquer? I thought all men were something like you—at heart, and that to please them one had only to try Oh, and I did try hard!"

The poor little face was drawn into piteous lines and wrinkles as she sighed forth this lament.

"But what has he done, child?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. If I could have seen before marriage a diary of my married life as it would be, I should have thought, as I did, that I was going into an earthly paradise. There is nothing wrong but the atmosphere, and there is only one thing wanting in that."

"He does not care for you?" I scarcely did more than form the words with my lips, but the answering tears rolled down her cheeks again at once.

"Not a bit. At least, not so much as *you* care for To-to or—Janet. And it isn't his fault. He is perfectly kind to me in his fashion, admires the way I have worked to please him, is grieved that I am dissatisfied with the result. Only—he did not take me in—of his own accord, and so I have remained always—outside. That's all!"

She spread out her little hands, and clasped them again, with a plaintive gesture of resignation.

"And—and if I seem ungrateful you must forgive

me; I've never been able to tell it all to any one for all these four years."

I was stricken with remorse, but I dared not give it the least expression for fear of the lengths to which it might carry me.

I made another journey among the gipsy tables and the pestilent *bric-à-brac*, and returning sat down, not on the sofa beside her, but in a chair a few feet away. I took a book up from a table by my side; I remember that it was *Marmion*, and that it had very exquisite illustrations.

"How about these friends, then, whose intimacy your husband disapproves of?"

"Oh, those!" contemptuously. "One doesn't open one's heart quite wide to such friends as those."

"Then if you care about them so little, why not give them up and please your husband?"

"One must be intimate with somebody," she said entreatingly, "even if it's only a tea-drinking and scandal-talking intimacy."

"But why with these particular people?"

"Because we all have a particular grievance: we all have bad husbands. At least—no, Fabian's not a bad husband," she corrected hastily; "but we are all dissatisfied with our husbands."

"Perhaps the husbands of those ladies I saw with you at the theatre—forgive me if I am making a rude and ridiculous mistake—are dissatisfied with them?" I suggested, very meekly and mildly.

"I daresay they are," she answered, flushing. "The less a man has of domestic virtues, the more he invariably expects from his wife."

"I am not surprised that Fabian shrinks from the thought of your looking as they do."

"You mean that they make up their faces? Mr. Maude, Mr. Maude, listen. A woman must have something to live upon, to live for. If through her fault or her misfortune, there is not love enough at home to keep her heart warm, she will—I don't say she ought, but she does—look about for a make-shift, and finds it in the admiration of some lad younger than herself, who is ready to give more than he ever hopes to receive. The boys like dyed hair and powdered faces, they think it 'chic.' But my friends are not the depraved creatures Fabian would like to make out."

I was horribly shocked at her defence of these ladies, for it showed a bitter knowledge of some of the world's ways that jarred on the lips of a woman of twenty

"I should not like to see you consoling yourself like that."

She looked at me frankly, and her face relaxed into a faint smile as she spoke.

"You need not be afraid; now you are back in England, I don't want any other consolation. I can't forget that there is goodness in the world while I can see you and hear from you. You are going to settle in town?" she added quickly and anxiously.

"No, I had not thought of doing so. I am going back to Lark——" Before I could finish the word she was at my feet, kneeling on a cushion and leaning over the arm of my chair with her face distorted by strong excitement.

"No, no, not Larkhall; you must not go back to Larkhall," she whispered earnestly. "Promise me you won't go there, promise, promise."

"Why, what's the matter? Where should I go but to the only home I have had for eleven years?"

"Yes, but it isn't safe now. If I tell you why you will only laugh at me."

"No, child, I should be ungrateful to laugh at any proof of your interest in me."

She put her hand on my arm, earnestly pressing it at every other word to give emphasis to her warning.

"My father—you remember him—he is dissatisfied with my marriage. He says you promised to be answerable for my happiness, and he shall make you answer for breaking faith with him."

"But I have not——"

"I know. I told him that, I told him everything; that I was dying, like the idiot I was, for the love of a man who didn't care for me. He has taken to drink—much worse than before—and he is impatient, savage, and won't listen to reason. He will do nothing but repeat again and again, 'He said he would answer for it, and he shall.'"

"But he doesn't even know I have returned."

"He said you were sure to fly back to the old nest, and—listen, Mr. Maude, for I know this is true; he has gone up there to lie in wait for you. And remember, a man who has one crazed idea and won't listen to anything but his own mad impulses, is more dangerous than one who is angry with good cause."

"Poor fellow, I think he has good cause."

"But, Mr. Maude, you don't know what ridiculous things he says!"

"What things?"

"He says that you ought not to have consulted

my caprices, but to have married me yourself straight away!"

She began to laugh as she finished, but I stopped her.

"He is quite right. So I ought to have done. Unluckily, there was one thing in the way"

Babiole, who was still on the cushion at my feet, leaning against the arm of my chair as she used to do in the Highlands, was looking interested and deeply surprised.

"One thing in the way!" she echoed softly, looking into my face with earnest scrutiny. "What—*before* I fell in love with—Fabian?"

"Yes, long before that."

She hesitated, and her eyes slowly left my face, while her brows contracted with a puzzled expression.

"What was it?" she asked at last, in a whisper.

"I was in love with you."

I could see very little of her face, but a shiver passed over her. For a moment I wondered, sitting quietly back in my chair, what she thought.

"Didn't you ever guess anything of it, child, when we had that odd sort of half-engagement?" I asked, in a most loyal tone of indifference.

She raised her head and looked at me modestly and solemnly.

"I should as soon have thought," she said, in a low unsteady voice, "that the Archbishop of Canterbury was—in love with me."

"Aha!" I said with a ridiculous cackling laugh. "Then I shouldn't have had much chance."

The next moment I knew better. She rose without another word, as the sounds of an opening and

shutting door reached our ears. But as she did so she cast upon me one quick, shy, involuntary side-glance, and I knew that my scruples about my ugly face had been worse than thrown away.

The next moment Fabian came into the room.

CHAPTER XX.

I LEFT London for Ballater the very next day; and having sent Ferguson on in advance to prepare the place for me, I found Larkhall just as I had left it four years before, down to a newspaper which had been lying on my study table. But the spirit of home had deserted the place; Ta-ta was still at Newcastle. To-to recognised me indeed, but more with sulky impatience at my absence than pleasure at my return. The cottage was shut up and empty; I got the key from Janet after dinner, and wandered through the unused damp-smelling little rooms. The furniture had been left, by my orders, just as it had been during the occupation of Babiole and her mother. But I found that instead of recalling the child Babiole, as I had seen her so often flitting about the sitting-room, or, in the latter days, leaning back, languid and listless, with glistening dreamy eyes, in the rocking-chair by the fire, it was the pale little London lady with pretty conventional manners and worn, weary face that I was trying to picture to myself in the uninhabited rooms. I came out again, locked the door carefully, and finished my cigar in the porch. It seemed to me a remarkably odd thing that Babiole's degeneration from the faultless angel she used as a child to appear, into a mere soured and sorrowful

woman who looked six or seven years more than her age, had deepened my interest in her, while my knowledge that she had been lost to me through nothing but my own diffidence had changed its character.

To get the better of the unhealthy and morbid state of mind into which I now found myself falling, I began to break through my old habits of retirement, and to avail myself of such society as Ballater and its neighbourhood afforded. The hot weather had begun early this year, and the summer residents were already established before my arrival. I was a sort of "great unknown," concerning whom there were floating about many interesting and romantic stories; therefore I found no lack of eager acquaintances as soon as I cared to make them. Prominent among these were a certain Mr. Farington, a Liverpool solicitor, who, after having made a yearly retreat to the Highlands each autumn, had now retired from business and taken the large house at the foot of Craigendarroch. He had been married twice, first to a lady of dazzling pecuniary charms who had left him one daughter, and after her death to a large and handsome lady who gave me a strong impression of having had doubtful antecedents. This second wife had a numerous family, ranging from five years old to fifteen, between whom and their half-sister was fixed the gulf of her mother's fortune.

At a very early stage of our acquaintance the eldest Miss Farington, who was a good-looking young woman of three and twenty, with a strong sense of the importance attached to an income of fifteen hundred a year, had honoured me by a marked partiality for which I, in my new sociability, at first felt grateful. It was pleasant to find some one who

could pass an opinion, even if it was not a very original opinion, on a picture, a book, or a landscape, and Miss Farington could always do that with great precision. Perhaps, too, it flattered my vanity to be appealed to as the one representative of high civilisation amidst barbarian hordes. But when it became plain even to my modest merit that the lady proposed to annex me, I grew suddenly coy; and I then found to my surprise that, diffident as my disfigurement had made me, I was still, like the rest of my sex, humble only to one woman, and mightily fatuous as regarded the rest. But if Miss Farington was merely what one calls "a nice girl," with no particularly conspicuous qualities of alluring sweetness or captivating vivacity, she had one virtue which would not have shamed an ancient Roman—an indomitable resolution that would not know defeat.

I am not making an idle boast; I am recording a fact when I say that that girl laid siege to me with a skill and patience which filled me alternately with admiration, gratitude and alarm. She learned my tastes, she studied my habits, she mastered my opinions, until I began to think that if a person who apparently knew me so well could like me so much, I must be an infinitely more amiable man than I had ever supposed. This frame of mind naturally led me to look kindly on the lady who had enabled me to make such a pleasing discovery, and I knew myself to be softening to such an extent that, unless Mr. Farington should leave Ballater before the summer was over, I should be "a gone coon" before autumn. If she held on till the evenings grew cold and long, until the winds began to howl about lonely Larkhall and to bring swirling showers of dead leaves to the

ground with the hissing sound of a beach of pebbles under the retreating waves of a wintry sea, then I felt that I should give way, that I should see in Miss Farington's prosaic grey eyes pleasant domestic pictures, in her erect figure and sloping shoulders an attraction which to a lonely man, when the deer-stalking and fishing seasons were over, were quite irresistible.

I had had one plaintive little letter from Babiole, in which she entreated me, in rather stiff and stilted language, out of which peeped a most touching anxiety, to beware of her father, who, she assured me, was more desperate and dangerous in his intentions to do me harm than she had even dared to suggest when face to face with me. I wrote back in a clumsy letter as stiff as her own, that she need have no fear, as her father had settled down quietly in Aberdeen. I dared not tell her the truth, which I had found out through Ferguson—that Mr. Ellmer had indeed come up to the Highlands with the avowed intention of doing me some desperate harm; but that, having availed himself too freely, through his daughter's generosity, of his favourite indulgences, he had had an attack of *delirium tremens*, and had been placed under restraint in the county lunatic asylum.

Babiole's letter I carried about with me, and sometimes—for loneliness among the hills would make a sentimental fool of the most robust of us—I fancied that the little sheet of paper, in spite of Miss Farington and the domestic pictures, burnt into my heart.

It was in the middle of August, while the weather was still—everywhere but in the Highlands—insufferably hot, that I received a letter from Fabian which gave me a great shock. His wife had been

very ill, he said, and although she had now been declared out of danger, she recovered strength so slowly that it had become imperative to send her away somewhere. Mrs. Ellmer, who was now with her, having suggested her old home in the Highlands, the doctor had agreed warmly, and Fabian therefore begged, as an old friend, that I would lend his wife and her mother the cottage for a short time, adding that he was sure I would look after my little favourite until, in a few days' time, he could rejoin her.

I took this letter up to Craigendarroch, and had first a cigar and then a pipe over it. To refuse Fabian's request was impossible; to lend the cottage and go away myself would be inhospitable and suspicious; to lend it and stay would be dangerous. With the last whiffs of tobacco an inspiration came. I swung back home, wrote back to Fabian that Larkhall itself, the cottage, the garden, the stables, and every toolshed about the place were entirely at Mrs. Scott's disposal, together with all the live stock, human and otherwise; and that she had only to fix the time of her arrival and Mrs. Ellmer's.

The letter finished and put in the bag, I had a glass of sherry; and fortified by that and by an heroic sense of duty, I sallied forth in the direction of the Mill o' Sterrin, in which neighbourhood Miss Farington, who did everything by rule, was always to be found district-visiting on a Thursday.

I suppose no man with ever so little brain or ever so little heart, who has deliberately made up his mind to propose to a girl, sees the moment approaching without a certain trepidation. I own that when I saw the moment and Miss Farington approaching together although I had very little doubt about her answer

and very little enthusiasm about the result, I had a thumping at my heart and a singing in my ears. With the memory of Babiole and the thought of her visit in my mind, not even the sherry would cast a glamour over those exceedingly sloping shoulders, which seemed almost to argue some moral deficiency, some terrible lack of some quality without which no woman's character is complete. In the meantime, she was bearing down upon me, and I was still without an opening speech. But she was not.

"What a treat to see you in this part of the world, Mr. Maude," said she, holding out her hand. "I confess I did you the injustice to think you would forget your promise."

"Promise!" I repeated vaguely. "I am afraid I must confess——"

"You had forgotten?" she said smiling. "Really this is too bad."

"At least, you see, I hadn't forgotten that this is the way you always walk on a Thursday," said I, with a look that was intended to convey much.

"And had forgotten my beautiful site for a new school!"

However, she was more pleased with me for what I had remembered than angry for what I had forgotten.

"At any rate you can come and see it now," she said, and turning back she led the way towards a broad meadow in the valley of the Muick, with a fair view of the little river and of the hills beyond, which would have been a very good site for a school, if a school had been needed.

"An awfully nice place for it," I agreed, as she expatiated upon the merits of a rising ground with

drainage towards the river, and shelter from the woods above. "And if the school ever gets built, I expect there will be only one thing it will want."

"Go on, though I know what you are going to say," said she.

"Scholars," I finished briefly.

Miss Farington nodded. "They will come," she said confidently, "if the thing is properly organised."

Organisation was her hobby. If that little affair came off, my library would be partly catalogued and partly burnt, and To-to would be organised into the stable-yard. Still I did not flinch.

"Think," said she enthusiastically, "what it would mean! To plant the first footing of knowledge, civilisation, refinement, among these peasants! To give them eyes to see the beauty of the nature which surrounds them! To give them resources for refined enjoyment when winter closes the door of nature to them! To widen their knowledge of the world, and teach them that 'hinter den Bergen sind auch Leute!' Oh, Mr. Maude, if building and starting this school were to cost ten thousand pounds, I should say the money had been well spent if in it but one single Highland boy were taught to read!"

Rather appalled by the thought of the lengths to which such a boundless enthusiasm might carry her, I murmured something to the effect that it would be rather expensive. Whereat she turned upon me.

"And can you, Mr. Maude, who profess to revel in Montaigne and Shakespeare, delight in Charles Lamb and Alfred de Vigny, deny such pleasures to your humble neighbours?"

"But my humble neighbours wouldn't read Shakespeare or Montaigne, nor even Wilkie Collins nor

Dumas the Elder. They'd read the 'Bow Bells' novelettes. And as to teaching them to admire their own hills, why they love them more than you do, for Nature isn't to them a closed book in winter as it seems to you."

I was on the wrong tack altogether, as I felt, when by good luck the lady herself brought me to more congenial ground.

"Then I suppose I mustn't expect much help from you, Mr. Maude," she said, rather stiffly.

"Yes, you may indeed, you may expect every help," I said, rushing at the opportunity, and growing hot over it. "It's true I—that—I don't much care—I mean I'm not deeply interested in Highland children, except as scenery, you know, picturesqueness and all that; but—er—but for you—in a plan of yours, that is to say, I should be delighted to do whatever lay in my power."

During this lame performance Miss Farington listened with a perfectly stolid face, but with a heightened colour which told that she knew, in vulgar parlance, what I was driving at. Now that I was coming to the point, however, she did not mean to have any "humbugging about." At least, some such determination as that, rather than maiden coyness, seemed to prompt her next speech.

"I don't *think* I quite understand you, Mr. Maude."

This was a challenge. I took it up.

"I think, Miss Farington, you must have noticed my growing interest in——"

"In my plans? No, indeed I haven't. Don't you remember your saying the other day that it seemed a pity to waste good drainage and sanitary regulations upon people who were never ill?"

"I—I only mean that my interest in—er—in drainage was swallowed up in my interest in you."

It was the very last way in which I should have chosen to introduce a declaration of love, but with a girl too much absorbed in the progress of humanity to encourage that of the individual man, there is nothing for you but to take what opening you can get. It was all right, at any rate, for she smiled and gave me her hand, the glove of which I respectfully kissed, noticing at the time that it smelt of treacle, and wondering how it had acquired that particular perfume. It occurred to me, even as I stood there trying to think of something to say, that the little boys she had been teaching must have been eating bread and treacle, and imparted its fragrance to their lesson-books.

"You have surprised me very much, Mr. Maude," she said. "Are you quite sure that I deserve this honour?"

Perhaps the question was not so insincere as it seemed to me, for she looked pleased, though not at all agitated. But I felt, as I reassured her with some conventional words, that my heart would have gone out more to the emptiest-headed little fool that ever giggled and blushed than to this most intelligent and matter-of-fact young woman. And I fell to wondering, as we began to walk back together, why the sentimental and the practical were so oddly divided in the feminine mind that a girl could glow with enthusiasm while talking about impracticable plans for making her neighbours uncomfortable, and listen quite coolly to a proposal to pass her life with the man she had made no secret of liking best. I had an awkward sense of not knowing what to talk about,

and I asked her how she liked Larkhall. She had evidently considered that matter well already, and was quite prepared with her answer.

"I think it only wants the south wing raised a storey, and the drawing-room enlarged by taking in that space between the outer wall and that row of lilacs and guelder-roses at the back, to make it one of the pleasantest country houses about here," she replied promptly.

I felt a cold shiver up my back, perceiving that even my study might be already doomed.

"But I like it even as it is because it is your home," she added, with a touch of human feeling for which I felt grateful.

"Thank you," I said, and I took her hand again. I hesitated about using her Christian name, and decided not to. "Lucy" seemed such an inappropriate appellation for Miss Farington; she ought at least to have been "Henrietta."

"I will try to make you like it still more," I said, quietly and sincerely, upon which she went the length of returning the pressure of my fingers on hers.

But she could not keep long away from those confounded plans. As we drew near the grounds of Larkhall, and could see the stables and one corner of the roof of the cottage, she stopped short and said pensively:

"I've often thought, Mr. Maude, what a pity it is that cottage should be kept empty, when it is so nicely furnished too. Your housekeeper, Mrs. Janet, took me over it one day." Perhaps it was anger at the thought that this young lady had mentally disposed of all my property prematurely, perhaps annoyance that she should have intruded in the cottage at all,

which helped to augment the sudden fury which seized me at this suggestion. She went on, quite unaware of what she had done. "Now I was thinking what a charming convalescent home a place like that would make for poor widows in reduced circumstances who——"

"Unfortunately I am too selfish to give up to strangers the accommodation which has always been reserved for my friends."

Miss Farington might be cold, might be prosaic, but she was not stupid. She saw at once she had gone too far, and hastened to apologise with very maidenly humility.

"I am afraid you will think I care more for my plans than for the great happiness and honour you have just done me. But indeed, Mr. Maude, it is not so. It is only that I never find any one to sympathise with my efforts but you, and so I tax your patience too much in my delight at meeting some one who is kind to me."

"Be kind to me too, then," I suggested, venturing, now that we had got among the trees of the garden, to put my hand lightly on her waist. She understood, and with a real blush at last, she let me kiss her. "I have been a hermit a long time," I said in a low voice, "and I have fallen out of the ways of the world and of women. But if you will only have patience with me, and not be too much frightened by my uncouth ways, I will make you a very good husband; and I promise you it shall be your own fault if I do not make you happy."

"I am sure of it," she said simply, with a confidence which was flattering, if still astonishingly prosaic.

I led her round the garden, gathered for her my best roses and fastened them together, while she critically surveyed the front of the house.

"It wants a coat of whitewash, doesn't it?" I suggested, anxious to show her that I was not too conservative.

"Ye—es, and the ivy wants trimming. Why don't you put it in the hands of the painters, Mr. Maude?"

"What, and go away—already! Surely that is too much to expect," I ventured, looking down into her eyes, which, if not boasting any poetical attractions of "hidden depths," were very clear and straightforward.

"Oh no, I don't mean that; but you could come and stay nearer to us. The people at Lossie Villa are just going to leave, I know."

"I am bound here for a little while, as one of my oldest friends has just asked me to give shelter to his wife and her mother for a few weeks."

"Indeed! Oh, they will be some people to know. Have I ever heard of them?"

"I don't know. The mother's name is Mrs. Ellmer, the daughter's—Mrs. Scott. She has been ill, I believe."

"Mrs. Ellmer! Why, surely those are the people who used to live at the cottage! Oh, I have heard about them and your kindness to them. People said——" She hesitated.

"Well, what did they say?"

"Oh, well, they said you used to be very fond of—the daughter."

"So I was; so I am. But you need not be jealous."

She laughed, a bright clear laugh, scarcely without a touch of good-humoured contempt at the suggestion.

"I jealous! Oh, Mr. Maude, you would not seriously accuse me of such a paltry feeling! It would be unworthy of you, unworthy of me."

I felt when I had taken my *fiancée* home and formally received her parent's sanction to our engagement, that I was myself unworthy to live in the intellectual and moral heights on which she flourished. But I could creep after her in a humble fashion, and do my best to make her love me.

And in the meantime my loyalty to my friend and my friend's wife was strengthened by a new and sacred bond.

CHAPTER XXI.

I SUPPOSE no man ever tried harder to be deeply, earnestly, sincerely in love than I tried to be with Miss Farington; and I suppose no man ever failed more completely. I believe now that to any other woman I have ever met, being a man by no means without affectionate impulses, and being also in a most propitious mood for sentiment, I should have been by the end of the week a submissive if not adoring slave. I wanted to be a slave; I was even anxious to become, for the time at least, the mere chattel of somebody else, a gracious and kindly somebody, be it well understood, who would give me the wages of affection in return for my best efforts in her service.

But Miss Farington's heart and mind were far too

well regulated for her to tolerate, much less seek, such an empire over the man who was to be her lord and master. She despised sentiment, and meant to begin as she intended to keep on, neither giving nor accepting an unreasonable amount of affection. Respect and esteem, and above all, compatibility of aim, she used to say, not harshly, but with an implied reproach to my own vulgar and sensual views, were the only sure foundation of happy married life; and I felt that so long as there was an unrepaired pig-stye within a mile of Larkhall, I was an object of comparatively small importance in my *fiancée's* eyes. And the worst of it was I couldn't contradict her. Reserving all her philanthropic projects, she was on other matters the incarnation of common sense; and I soon found that it was the vague reputation for intellect which any man gets in the country who likes his books better than his neighbours, which had attracted her attention to my unworthy self. She was disappointed with her bargain already; I was sure of that: but having made it, she was not the woman to go back from her word. She even had the good taste, on finding that her "plans" palled upon me, to drop them out of her conversation to a great extent, but I had a shrewd suspicion that they would be let loose upon me again with full force as soon as she should be installed as mistress of Larkhall. I was secretly resolved however, since my lady-love declined to rule me in the right woman's way—through her heart—to assert my supremacy of the head in a startling and unexpected manner so soon as I should be legally the master.

In the meantime we jogged on with our engagement, and I found in my daily walks with Lucy, and

in luncheons and teas at her father's, no charm strong enough to make me for a moment forget the fact that in a few days Babiole would be under my own roof.

For I had decided that not honour enough could be done to my guests at the cottage; and, Ferguson and old Janet joining in the work with a heartiness which made me love them, we turned out the whole house from garret to basement, and for a week there was such a sweeping and garnishing as never was known. We had only just got it in order when Fabian's telegram came announcing that they were off, and for the next forty-eight hours nobody could stop to take breath. The stable-boy had insisted on erecting at the entrance a lop-sided triumphal arch which, after having required constant renewing of its branches for a day and a half, having been put up much too soon, had to be taken down at the last moment, as it was found that a carriage could not drive under it without either the arch carrying away the coachman, or the coachman carrying away the arch. They were to break the journey by spending one night at Edinburgh, and I had proposed to meet them at Aberdeen on the following day. But Miss Farington's uncle having come to Ballater on purpose to annoy me—I mean on purpose to meet me—I was forced to attend a most dull luncheon at Oak Lodge where I, in absence of mind, made myself very objectionable by expressing a doubt whether any lawyers would be found in heaven.

They made me stay to tea, though I'm sure nobody wanted me, and I was dying to get away. It was nearly six before I could leave, and I rushed to the little station just as the passengers were streaming out of the train. I knew that Babiole was among

them, and I came upon her suddenly as I got through the door on to the platform. She was leaning on her mother, pale, thin, wasted so that for pity and terror I could not speak, but just held out my arm and supported her to the carriage which, by my orders, was waiting outside. As we drove off she leaned against her mother and held out her hand to me.

"Again—after four years, to be back with you under old Craigendarroch," she said, almost in a whisper, with moist eyes.

"Yes, yes, we'll set you up again as none of your London doctors could do," I said huskily.

She smiled at me, still keeping my hand.

"Will you, Mr. Maude?" she asked half doubtingly, like a child.

"See what marriage has done for her!" broke in Mrs. Ellmer half mournfully, half tartly "She wouldn't be satisfied till she'd tried it, and look at the result."

At that moment a yelping and barking behind us attracted our attention, and the next moment poor old Ta-ta, released from the van in which she had been travelling, overtook the carriage, and tried to leap up from the road to lick my face.

"Ta-ta, old girl, why, we're going to have the old times back again," I cried, much moved; and after a drive in which only Mrs. Ellmer talked much, we all reached Larkhall in a more or less maudlin condition, overcome by old recollections.

All the men and boys about the place had assembled in two rows at the entrance, and gave us a hearty cheer as we drove past. Ferguson was standing at the door, and I vow his hard old eyes

were moist as he insisted on helping the little lady out himself. Janet, in a cap which rendered the wearer insignificant, made a respectful curtsey to Mrs. Scott as she came up the steps, but threw her arms around her as soon as she was fairly inside the hall.

Mrs. Ellmer and I were rather afraid of the effects of fatigue and excitement on a frame scarcely convalescent, but the pleasure of being back among the hills was such a powerful stimulant that within half an hour of going upstairs to the big south bedroom, which had been aired and cleaned and done up expressly for her, she flitted down again with quick steps, and with a faint stain of pink colour showing under the transparent skin of her thin cheeks.

I was just outside the front door, where I had been hovering about with an unlighted cigar between my lips, when I caught a glimpse of soft white drapery in the heavy shadows of the old staircase. I went back into the hall and looked up at her, as she stopped with one hand on the bannisters, smiling down on me but saying nothing. She wore a transparent white dress that looked like muslin only that it was silky, with a long train that remained stretched on the stairs above her as she stopped.

"I thought it was an angel flying over my staircase," I said gently.

"And all the while it was only a silly moth that had singed its wings in the big bright candle you had warned it to keep away from," she answered gravely, after a pause.

"The wings will grow again, and when it goes back to the light——"

"We won't talk about going back yet," she broke in with a little shiver. "I want to forget all about London for a little while, and try to feel just as I used to do here. I wouldn't bring Davis with me. Poor mamma is going to be my nurse, and you to be my doctor, and I am going to take Craigendarroch after every meal."

"You must be ready for one now, one meal, I mean, not one mountain. Where is poor mamma?"

"Oh, she's gone to talk to Janet. She thinks I am still waiting for her to do my hair. But she shall see that I am not an invalid any longer."

But as she spoke, the light died out of her eyes, and I saw the fragile white hand, the blue-veined delicacy of which had alarmed me, suddenly clutch the bannister-rail tightly.

"You mustn't boast too soon," said I, as I ran up the stairs and supported her.

She recovered herself in a few moments, being only very weak and tired, and she suddenly lifted her face to mine quite merrily.

"Shall we take Froude to-morrow, Mr. Maude? Or shall I prepare a chapter of Schiller's *Thirty Years' War?*" she asked, just in the old manner. "Or a couple of pages of *Ancient History?*"

"I think," I answered slowly, while my heart leapt up as a salmon does at a fly, and I honestly tried not to feel so disloyally, unmistakably happy, "that we'll do a little modern poetry, and that we'll begin with 'The Return of the Wanderer.'"

I was leading her slowly downstairs, when Mrs. Ellmer's high piercing voice, coming towards us as the door of the housekeeper's room was opened, suddenly broke upon our ears.

"Well, I must go and congratulate him. I'm sure I always said that a nice wife was just the one thing he wanted."

"Who's that?" asked Babiole quite sharply.

"Why, don't you know your own mother's voice?"

"Yes, yes, but who is she talking about? Who is it wants a nice wife?"

"I suppose most of us do, only we are not all so lucky as a certain young actor I know," I said brightly; but my heart beat violently, and I felt Babiole's fingers trembling on my arm.

She asked me no more questions, and I took her into the dining-room to admire the roses with which we had loaded the table. But when her mother joined us a moment later, brimming over with excitement about my engagement, Babiole nodded and said, "Yes, mother, I've heard all about it," and offered no congratulations.

As for me, the remembrance of my *fiancée* this evening threw me into a reckless mood. "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we—marry Miss Farington" was the kind of thought that lay at the bottom of my deliberate abandonment of myself to the enthralling pleasure the mere presence of this little white human thing had power to give me. Mrs. Ellmer and I were very lively both at dinner and afterwards in the study, where we all went merely to look at To-to, but where Babiole insisted on our staying. She did not talk much; but on the other hand, her face never for a moment fell into that listless sadness which had pained and shocked me so much in London. When at last she was so evidently tired out that we had reluctantly to admit that she must go to bed, she let her mother see

that she wanted to speak to me, and remained behind to say:

"I want to see this lady you are going to marry. For I'm not going to congratulate you till I see whether she is sweet, and beautiful, and noble, and worthy to—worship you, Mr. Maude," she ended earnestly.

"She is a very nice girl," said I, playing with To-to with unconscious roughness, which the monkey resented.

"A nice girl for *you!*" she said scornfully. "She must be more than that, or I will forbid the banns. I was afraid you would think it strange that I didn't say something about it," she went on, after a moment's pause, rather nervously; "but when I heard it—just now—I prayed about it—I did indeed—just as I used for myself and Fabian."

A fear evidently struck her here that the reminiscence was ill-omened, for she hastened to add, "But then I didn't deserve to be happy—and you do. Good-night," she concluded abruptly, and drawing her hot hand with nervous haste out of mine she left me.

The next day came a reaction from the excitement of her arrival, and Babiole was not able to leave her room until late in the afternoon. I had paid my duty-call at Oak Lodge in the morning, and had been disconcerted to find that common sense and philanthropy had grown less attractive than ever. Lucy expressed her intention of calling upon Mrs. Scott that very afternoon, and when I explained that she was tired and not likely to make her appearance before dinner-time, my philanthropist said that she would drive round to Larkhall in the evening. From

this pertinacity I concluded that Miss Farington was perhaps not so entirely free from human curiosity and perhaps feminine jealousy as she would have liked me to suppose. At any rate she kept me with her all day, an unquiet conscience having made me exceedingly docile; and it was six o'clock before I got home.

I went straight into the drawing-room, where Babiole, lying on a sofa before one of the windows, was enjoying the warm light of the declining sun.

"Better?" said I simply, coming up to the sofa and looking down. All the energy and animation of the evening before were gone now; but to me Babiole never lost one charm without gaining a greater; she had been fascinating in a lively mood, she was irresistible in a quiet one. She gave me her hand and answered in a weak voice—

"Yes, I'm better, thank you."

"What have you been thinking about so quietly all by yourself? I don't fancy you ought to be allowed to think at all."

"I've been thinking about poor papa. Have you heard anything more about him?"

"Yes, he's all right, I believe, settled down in Aberdeen. I don't think you'd better try to see him though. It might set him worrying again on the old subject, which perhaps he has forgotten."

She shook her head. "You don't know papa as mamma and I do. He wastes his life so that people despise him, and believe that he cares for nothing but the day's enjoyment. But they are wrong. He is fierce and sullen, and he never forgets. He came up here to see *you*, and to do you harm; and he will never rest until at least he's tried to."

"Well, he and I were very good friends, and there is nothing I should like better than to meet him and make him listen to reason—as I'm sure he would do."

"He—he might not give you a chance."

I was pleased by her solicitude for me, but I showed her how very far-fetched her fears were, and assured her, moreover, that if Mr. Ellmer, with the brutal ferocity which had been ascribed to him, should ever go so far as to attack me personally, he would probably find his match in a man who lived so hardily as I.

CHAPTER XXII.

I DID not mention Miss Farington's threatened visit until the very moment when, after dinner, as we were all turning out for a walk round the garden, I caught a glimpse of her little pony carriage between the trees of the drive. Babiole, wrapt in a long shawl of Indian embroidery which I had taken a fancy to in a bazaar in Calcutta, and had sent home to her, was standing by a rose-tree and choosing the flowers which I was to cut. Mrs. Ellmer, with characteristic vivacity, was running little races with old Ta-ta, whose failing energy was now satisfied with such small performances as these. The dog stopped short to bark at the carriage, to which Mrs. Ellmer now directed my attention.

"Oh yes, it's Miss Farington, I think; she said she might come round this evening."

"What! Miss Farington? Your young lady? And you could forget that she was coming! Oh, naughty, naughty!" cried Mrs. Ellmer.

Babiole's face had flushed from chin to forehead.

"We must go and meet her," she said quietly, setting the example of going up the steps which led from terrace to terrace to the house.

Reminded of my duty, I hastened up to the lawn, and was just in time to help my visitor out of the little carriage. She wore a gray dress, a dark blue jacket, a brown hat, and black silk gloves—a costume in which I had seen her often before, but which had not struck me as being a hideous combination until I saw it straightway after looking at a figure which, seen in the soft evening shadows which had begun to creep up under the trees, had left in my mind an intoxicating vision of rich colours and soft outlines, like the conception of an Indian princess by an Impressionist painter.

Lucy Farington's manner suffered as much by contrast with Mrs. Scott's as her dress had done. Never before had she seemed so matter-of-fact, so brusque, so blind and deaf to everything that was not strictly useful or severely intellectual. On finding that Mrs. Scott took but a tepid interest in the subject of artisans' dwellings, and had no acquaintance with the writings either of Kant or Klopstock, she glanced at me, who had never been bold enough to avow the whole depth of my indifference to the one and my ignorance of the other subject, with an expression of scarcely disguised contempt.

"I'm afraid Henry and I shall scarcely find in you a warm sympathiser with our plans, Mrs. Scott," she said with rather a pitying smile. "But of course we must not expect you London ladies to condescend to take an interest in cottagers; and it is only we poor

country girls who, for want of anything better to do, have to improve our minds."

We were all in the drawing-room now, to my great regret, for I felt that if we had remained in the garden we might have dispersed ourselves, and I might have been spared hearing my *fiancée's* unaccountable outbreak of bad taste. Babiole answered very quietly:

"You have misunderstood me a little, I am afraid, Miss Faringtón," she said. "It is not that my mother and I don't take an *interest* in cottagers; but that having been cottagers ourselves, and having known and visited cottagers rather as friends than as patrons, we can't at once jump into the habit of considering them wholesale, as if we were poor-law guardians."

"And as for improving one's mind," broke in Mrs. Ellmer, who was growing exceedingly irate at the persistent manner in which the philanthropist ignored her, "you must blame Mr. Maude if she is not learned enough, for it was he who educated her."

This bold speech made a great sensation. Miss Faringtón drew herself up. Babiole shot at me an eloquent involuntary glance from eyes which were suddenly filled with tears; while I confess that if I had been called upon to speak at that moment I should have gone near to choking. In the meantime Mrs. Ellmer went on undaunted.

"I suppose it's very old-fashioned to think that one's studies ought to be with the object of giving pleasure to other people. But I'm sure it's pleasanter to hear a girl play a nice piece of music than to hear her talk about books that most of us have never heard of."

"I love music—*good* music," said Lucy coldly. "No study is more refining and more profound than that of the great masters of harmony. I had no idea, Mrs. Scott, that you were an accomplished amateur. Will you not give me the pleasure of hearing you?"

"I am afraid I am not a very scientific student," said Babiole, as she walked towards the piano which I opened for her.

She looked so pale and tired that I suggested in a low voice that she had better not play to-night. She glanced at Miss Farington, however, and I, following the direction of her eyes, saw that my *fiancée* was watching us in a displeased manner. I therefore beat a retreat from the piano, and Babiole began to play. She was a good performer, and though not one of phenomenal accomplishment, she seemed to me to give something of her own grace and charm to the music she interpreted. She was nervous this evening on account of the critical element in the audience; but I thought she played with even more of sympathy and of power than usual. She had chosen one of the less hackneyed of Mendelssohn's "Songs without Words," and when she had finished I thanked her heartily, while Miss Farington chimed in with more reserve.

"I am afraid," said Babiole, "that it is not the sort of music to give you great pleasure, but I can't play much by heart, and that is one of the few things I know."

"Of course," agreed Miss Farington readily, "I acquit you of such a terrible charge as an enthusiasm for the shallow sentimentalism of the 'Lieder ohne Worte.' Some day, I hope, in the day-time, you will let me have the pleasure of hearing you play some-

thing you really like. It is really very good of you to have received me at all so late, but I had heard so much about you that I really must plead guilty to the *childish* charge of not being able to control my impatience to see you."

And Miss Farington took leave of the two ladies and sailed out of the room, followed meekly by me. I was in no affectionate mood, having been astonished and disgusted by her undreamt-of powers of making herself disagreeable.

"I want you to come and spend the day at Oak Lodge to-morrow, Henry," she said in a kinder tone than she had used during the evening, as soon as she was seated in the pony-carriage. "I have some designs of a new church to show you, which I think even you will like; and my Uncle Matthew is most anxious to see more of you than he had a chance of doing yesterday."

"Thank you; it is very kind," I answered rather coldly; "and of course I shall be happy to come and see you to-morrow as usual if you will let me. But I couldn't spend the whole day at Oak Lodge, because, you see, I have guests to consider."

"And can't they spare you for a single afternoon?" asked Lucy with a hard laugh. "I shall really begin to feel quite jealous."

"You need not indeed," I broke out hastily and earnestly, "I assure you——"

She interrupted me in a very abrupt and icy manner. "Pray do not take the trouble. No man who was such a flimsy creature as to give me reason for jealousy could possibly retain a hold upon my affections."

"Of course not," I assented, in my usual mean-

spirited way, but with a dawning suspicion that my *fiancée's* affections could not prove strong enough for even a less flimsy creature than I to obtain a firm grip on.

"My father and Mrs. Farington will drive over to-morrow," Lucy went on; "I believe they intend to ask Mrs. Scott to dinner. I suppose one must ask the mother too," she added dubiously.

"It will certainly be better, unless you wish to insult them both," I said in an unnaturally subdued tone the significance of which I think she failed to notice. "But in any case the invitation will have no awful results, for Mrs. Scott is not well enough to go out to dinners."

"Ah, poor thing, I suppose not. She looks very ill. It seems almost impossible to believe what they tell me, that she was once very pretty. Perhaps she would not look so bad though if somebody could only persuade her to dress like other people. Did you ever see anything like that shawl arrangement she had on when I first came?"

"Never," said I calmly. "But I confess I am barbarous enough to think that a merit. Every lady's style of dress should have something unique about it."

"Indeed! Then how about mine?"

"Your style of dress is unique too," said I politely.

Miss Farington looked at me doubtfully, but came, I think, to the conclusion that she had been disagreeable enough for one day, even if this compliment were a dubious one. So she contented herself by begging me warmly to come early the next day and to remember that my guests were not to absorb me too entirely, and then she advanced her cheek for me

to kiss and drove away through the trees. When I turned back into the house I found a great turmoil prevailing. "Mistress Scott had been on her way to her room when she had swooned awa' on the stairs," Janet said. I stole presently up the staircase to her door, and Mrs. Ellmer came out to tell me that Babiole had indeed been overcome by fatigue and had fainted, but that she was much better now, and would be all right in the morning after the night's rest.

But I was anxious about the poor child; for her pallor during the evening had frightened me. My Lucy's new departure too had given me something to think about, so that sleep for the present was out of the question. I therefore determined to keep my vigil comfortably; going into the study I threw another log on the fire which, winter and summer, was always necessary in the evening, and, lighting my pipe, stretched myself in my old chair and gave myself up to meditation, which resolved itself before long into a doze.

I woke up suddenly before the fire had got low, and heard the old boards of the floor above me creaking repeatedly, as if some one were hurrying about on them with a soft tread. The room over my study was that which had been assigned to Mrs. Scott, so that I was on the alert at once, afraid that she had been taken ill again in the night, and that her mother, who slept in a little room next to hers, was running to and fro in attendance upon her.

I jumped up from my chair, with the intention of going upstairs to ask Mrs. Ellmer whether I could be of any use; but before I had taken two steps, in a slow sleepy fashion, listening all the time, the creak-

ing ceased, and I heard the sound of a door being opened on the landing above. The study-door was ajar, so that in the complete stillness of the night the faintest noise was audible to me. I crossed the room softly, creeping nearer to the door with keenly open ears and with something more than curiosity in my mind. For without being at all one of those highly sensitive persons who can distinguish without fail one footfall from another, I knew the difference between Mrs. Ellmer's quick active step, and the slow soft tread which I now heard on the polished uncarpeted floor of the corridor. The steps became inaudible as I caught the light sound of a skirt sweeping from stair to stair: then again I heard a slow tread on the polished floor of the hall. Although I knew well enough who it was, a long sigh which suddenly reached my ears and proclaimed beyond a doubt the wanderer's identity, seemed to pierce my body and leave a deep wound. It was Babiole, either in misery or in pain, who was wandering about the house in the middle of the night. She was feeling about for something in the darkness when I opened wide the door of my study, and let the lamplight fall upon her just as the chain of the front door rattled in her hands and fell with a loud noise against the oak.

She glanced back at me in a startled manner, but proceeded to unlock the door and to turn the handle. She had on the muslin dress she had worn during the evening, with her travelling cloak and bonnet. I saw by the vacant manner in which her eyes rested for a moment upon me, without surprise or recognition, that there was some cloud in her brain. I advanced quickly into the hall and laid my fingers upon the handle of the door.

"What are you doing here to-night?" I asked in a low voice, but with an air of authority. "You ought to be sleeping."

She drew back a little and looked helplessly from the door to me.

"Now go upstairs again and get into bed as fast as you can," I continued coaxingly, "or your mother will find out that you have left your room, and be very much frightened."

But recalling her purpose, she made a spring towards the door, and as I stood firm and prevented her opening it, she fell to wild and piteous entreaties.

"Let me pass, please. I must go, I tell you I must go, before they know—before they guess. It will all come right if I go."

"Tell me first why you want to go," said I gently

The lamp-light streamed out from the open study door upon us, showing me her dazed, almost haggard face, her disordered dress, the nervous trembling of her hands. She looked at me for a moment more steadily, and I thought she was coming to herself.

"I can't tell *you*," she whispered, still fumbling with the door handle and looking down at her own fingers.

"Well, then, go upstairs now, and you shall tell me all about it to-morrow," I said persuasively.

"No, no, no," she broke out wildly and vehemently, as at first, seeming again to lose all control of herself as she became excited. "To-morrow I shall be happy again, and I shall not be able to go. He cannot care for this girl while I'm here, I know it? I am spoiling everything for them; I want to go back to my husband, and not wait for him to come and fetch me. Don't you see? Don't you understand?"

Even while she babbled out these secrets, ignorant who I was, her instinct of confidence in me made her support herself on my arm, and lean upon me as she whispered excitedly in my ear.

"Well, but it is night, and there are no trains till the morning, you know."

For a moment she seemed bewildered. Then with an expression of childlike simplicity she said, "I shall find my way. God told me I was right to go. I can pray up here among the hills, just as I used when I was a child, and He told me it was right."

Luckily, perhaps, her strength was failing her even as she spoke. She swayed unsteadily on my arm and made little resistance but a faint murmur of protest as I half carried her back to the staircase. As her head fell languidly against my shoulder I saw that again, as fatigue overcame excitement, she was recovering her wandering consciousness, and I made haste to take advantage of the fact.

"Come," said I, "you had better go upstairs and rest a little while—before you start, you know."

She looked up at me in a dreamy bewildered manner as she leant, supported by my arms, against the staircase, and two tears, shining in the darkness, rolled down her cheeks. "I am afraid," said she in a broken whisper, "that I shall not be able to go at all."

Then, with a long sigh, she stood up, twined her arms within mine and let me lead her upstairs. The door of her room was open, and the two candles, flickering and smoking in the draught, cast moving shadows over a disorder of dress and dainty woman's clothing flung in confusion about the room. Babiole

glanced inside and then looked up at me in bewilderment and alarm, like one roused out of sleep to see something strange and terrible. I wanted her to go to rest before her memory should overtake her. So I took off her bonnet and cloak, and profiting by the utter docility she showed me, glanced into the room and said, in a tone of authority, such as one would use to a child :

"Now, I shall come upstairs again in exactly five minutes and shall knock at your door. If you are in bed by that time you are to call out 'good-night.' If you are not, I shall wake your mother up, and send her to you. Now will you do as I tell you?"

"Yes, yes," said she meekly.

"Then good-night."

"Good-night, Mr. Maude."

She knew me then ; but I somehow fancied, from the old-fashioned demureness with which she gave her hand, that she believed herself to be once more the little maid of Craigendarroch, and me to be her old master.

Next day Babiole did not appear at breakfast, and her mother said she was in a state of deep depression, and must, her mother thought by her manner, have had a fright in the night. I was very anxious to see her again, and to find out how much she remembered of our nocturnal adventure. So anxious was I, in fact, that I forgot all about my appointment at Oak Lodge at eleven, and it was not until Mrs. Ellmer and I were having luncheon at two that I was suddenly reminded of my neglect in a rather summary fashion by being presented by Ferguson with a note directed in my *fiancée's* handwriting, and told that a messenger was waiting. I opened it, conscience-stricken, but

hardly prepared for the blow it contained. This was the note:

"DEAR MR. MAUDE—" [The opening was portentous] "It is with feelings of acute pain that I address thus formally a gentleman in whom I once thought I had had the good fortune to discover a heart, and more especially a mind, to which I could in all things submit the control of my own weaker and more frivolous nature." [Lucy Farington frivolous! Shades of Aristotle and Bacon!] "For some time past I have begun to feel that I was deceived. I do not for a moment mean that you intended deception, but that, in my anxiety to believe the best, I deceived myself. Your growing indifference to the dearest wishes of my heart, culminating in your positive non-appearance this morning (when I had prepared a little surprise for you in shape of a meeting with Mr. Finch, the architect, with his designs for a model self-supporting village laundry), leave hardly any room for doubt that our views of life are too hopelessly dissimilar for us to hope to embark happily in matrimony. If this is indeed the case, with much regret I will give you back your liberty, and request the return of my perhaps foolishly fond letters. If, on the other hand you are not willing that all should be at an end between us, I beg that you will come to me in the pony carriage which will await your orders. I remain, dear Mr. Maude, with my sincerest apologies if I have been unduly hasty, yours most sincerely,

"LUCY FARINGTON."

My first emotion was one of anger against the girl

for being such a fool; my second was of thankfulness to her for being so wise. I should have liked, in pique, to have straightway got those letters, which she was mistaken in considering compromisingly affectionate, to have made them into a small but neat parcel and despatched them forthwith. Instead of this, I excused myself to Mrs. Ellmer, went into the study in a state of excitement, half pain and half relief, and wrote a note.

"My Dear Miss Farington—Your letter forbids me to address you in a more affectionate way, though you are mistaken in supposing that my feelings towards you have changed. It seems to me that we have both, if I may use the expression, been running our heads against a brick wall. You have been seeking in me a learned gentleman with a strong natural bent for philanthropy, while I hoped to find in you an intelligent and withal most kind and loving-hearted girl, who would condescend to console me for the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,' in return for my very best endeavours to make her happy. Well, is the mistake past repairing? I am not too old to learn philanthropy under your guidance; you, I am sure, are too sweet not to forgive me for preferring a walk with you alone to interviews with all the architects who ever desecrated nature. I cannot come back with the carriage now to see Mr. Finch; but if you will, in the course of the afternoon, let me have another ever so short note telling me to come and see *you*, I shall take it as a token that you are willing to give me another chance, and within half-an-hour of receiving it I will be with you to take my first serious lesson in philanthropy and to pay for it in what love coin you

please.—Believe me, dear Lucy if I may, dear Miss Farington if I must, yours ever most faithfully and sincerely,

"HENRY L. MAUDE."

I saw the groom drive off with this note, and spent the early part of the afternoon wandering about the garden, trying to make out what sort of answer I wished for. This was the one I got:

"DEAR MR. MAUDE—The tone of levity which characterises your note admits but of one explanation. No gentleman could so address the lady whose respect and esteem he sincerely wished to retain. I therefore return your letters and the various presents you have been kind enough to make me, and beg that you will return me my share of our correspondence. Please do not think I bear you any ill-will; I am willing to believe the error was mutual, and shall rather increase than discontinue my prayers on your behalf, that your perhaps somewhat pliable nature may not render you the victim of designing persons.—I remain, dear Mr. Maude, ever sincerely your friend,

"LUCY FARINGTON."

When I got to the end of this warm-hearted effusion I rushed off to make up my parcel: seven notes, a smoking-cap, and a pair of slippers, which last I regretted giving up, as they were large and comfortable; a book on Village Architecture, and another of sermons by an eloquent and unpractical modern preacher, completed the list. I fastened them up, sealed and directed them, and sent them out to the under-gardener from "Oak Lodge," who had

brought the note, and had been directed to wait for an answer. Then, with a sense of relief which was unmixed this time, I went back to my study, lit my pipe, and sat down in front of the parcel my late love had sent me. I was struck by its enormous superiority in neatness to the ill-shapen brown paper bundle in which I had just sent off mine; and it presently occurred to me that the remarkable deftness with which corners had been turned in and string knotted and tied could never have been attained by hands unused to any kind of active labour. Miss Farington, either too much overcome by emotion to tie her parcel up herself, or from an absence of sentiment which might or might not be considered to do her credit, had entrusted the task of sending back my presents to her maid.

Mechanically I opened the parcel and, not being deeply enough wounded by the abrupt termination of my engagement to throw my rejected gifts with passion into the fire, I arranged them on the table in a row, spread out my returned letters (which had all been neatly opened with a pen—or small paper-knife), and considered the well-meant but disastrous venture of which they were the relics with much thoughtfulness. It had been a failure from first to last: not only had it failed to draw my thoughts and affections from the little pale lady who was now the wife of my friend, but it had also unhappily resulted in rendering her by contrast a lovelier and more desirable object than before. There was no doubt of it: the only unalloyed pleasure my *fiancée* had afforded me was the increase of delight I had felt, after nearly three weeks of her improving society, in meeting my little witch of the hills once more. On the whole my conscience

was pretty clear with regard to Miss Farington; I had been prepared to offer her affection, and she had preferred an interest in domestic architecture, which I had then sedulously cultivated: the question was, what was to be done now? I decided that the most prudent course would be to say nothing of my rupture with my lady-love, and if I should be unable to subdue a certain unwonted hilarity at dinner time, to ascribe it to other causes.

I had scarcely made this resolution, however, when I heard light sounds in the hall and a knock at my door, and I said "Come in" with my heart leaping up and a hot and feverish conviction that it was all up with the secret; for the outspread letters which I convulsively gathered into a heap, the lace pocket-handkerchief, the chased gold smelling-bottle, and other articles for which a bachelor of retired habits would be likely to have small use, told their own tale; while, to make matters worse, To-to had got hold of the engagement ring and had placed it on the top of his box for safety while he minutely inspected its morocco case, and chewed up the velvet lining with all the zest of a gourmand.

One helpless glance was all I had time for before the door opened, and Babiole came in.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON hearing the soft tap of Babiole's fingers on the door of my study, there had sprung up in me quite suddenly a feeling that my anchor was gone, and the tempest of human passion which I had controlled for so long burst out within me with a violence which made me afraid of myself. There, on the table before me, lay the eloquent relics of my rejected suit to the woman I had tried to love. And here, shut out from me only by the scarcely-closed door, was the woman I loved so dearly without the trying, that just that faint sound which told me she was near thrilled through every fibre of my body as the musician's careless fingers sweep the keys of his instrument in a lightly-touched prelude before he makes it sing and throb with any melody he pleases. I had sprung to my feet and begun to toss my returned letters one by one with shaking hands into the fire, when I heard Babiole's voice behind me.

I turned abruptly, and it seemed to myself almost defiantly. But no sooner had I given one glance at the slender figure dressed in some plain dark stuff and one into the little pale face than all the tumult within me began to calm down, and the roaring, ramping, raging lion I had felt a moment before transformed himself gradually before the unconscious magic of my fairy's eyes into the mild and meek old lamb he had always been with her.

"You seem very busy, Mr. Maude," said she, smiling.

Surely it was my very witch herself again, only a little thinner and whiter, who spoke to me thus in the old sweet voice, and held out her hand with the half-frank, half-shy demureness of those bygone, painful-pleasant days when we were "engaged," and when the new and proud discovery that she was "grown-up" had given a delicious piquancy to her manner of taking her lessons! I shook hands with her, and she pointed to her old chair; as she took it quite simply and thus had the full light of the windows on her face, I noticed with surprise and pleasure that, in spite of the excitement of the night before, the atmosphere of her old home was already taking effect upon her, the listless expression she had worn in London was disappearing from her face, and the old child-like look which blue eyes were meant to wear was coming back into them again.

"You are better," said I gently, taking no notice of her remark upon my occupation. "You have been lazy, madam. I am sure you might very well have come down to breakfast. You had a good night, I suppose?"

Ta-ta, who had followed her into the room, pushed her nose lovingly into her old companion's hand, and Babiole hid a sensitively flushing face by bending low over the dog's sleek head. I think she must have found out that morning by the confusion in her room that something had happened the night before, the details of which she could not remember; perhaps also she had a vague remembrance of her expedition downstairs, and wanted to find out what I knew about it. But of course I knew nothing.

"Yes, I—I slept well—thank you. Only I had dreams."

"Did you? Not bad ones, I hope?"

She glanced at me penetratingly, but could discover nothing, as I was fighting with To-to over the fragments of the morocco ring case.

"No-o, not exactly bad, but very strange. Do you know—I found—my travelling hat and cloak—lying about—and I wondered whether—in my sleep—I had put them on—thinking I was—going back to London!"

All this, uttered very slowly, and with much hesitation, I listened to without interruption, and then, standing up with my back to the fire, nodded to her reassuringly.

"Well, so you did, Mrs. Scott, and a nice fright your sleep-walking propensities gave me, I can tell you. It was by the luckiest chance in the world that I didn't brain you with the poker for a burglar when I heard footsteps in the hall in the middle of the night!"

"You did!" cried she, pale to the lips with apprehension.

"Yes; and when I saw you, you muttered something I couldn't understand, and then you half woke up, and you went back quickly to your room again, leaving me considerably wider awake than before."

"Is that all?" asked Babiole, the faint colour coming back to her face again.

"It was quite enough for me, I assure you. And I hope you will take your walking exercise for the future in the day-time, when my elderly nerves are at their best."

Babiole laughed, much relieved. She evidently retained such a vivid impression of the thoughts which had preyed upon her excited mind on the

previous evening that she was tormented by the fear or the dim remembrance of having given them expression. She now looked with awakening interest at the odd collection on the table.

"Are you making preparations for a fancy bazaar, Mr. Maude?" she asked, taking up a case which contained a gold thimble.

But she knew what the exhibition meant, and she was glad, though neither of us looked at the other as she put this question, and I made no answer.

"No; the bazaar is over, and these are the things left on my hands."

"Then I am afraid—the bazaar—has not been very successful?" she hazarded playfully, but in a rather unsteady voice.

"Not very. My customers were discontented with their bargain, and wanted their money back."

Babiole's sensitive face flushed suddenly with hot indignation.

"How dare she——" she began passionately, and stopped.

"My dear Mrs. Scott, these girls dare anything!" said I lightly, in high spirits at the warmth with which she took up my cause. "There is no respect left for the superior sex now that ladies out-read us, out-write us, out-shoot us, and out-fish us. And the end of it is that I wash my hands of them, and have made up my mind to die a bachelor!"

If she could have known how clearly her fair eyes showed me every succeeding emotion of her heart and thought of her brain, as I glanced with apparent carelessness at her face while I spoke, she would have died of shame. I had thought, on that night when I met her in London when she had charmed

and yet pained me by her brilliant, graceful, but somewhat artificial manner, that she was changed, that I should have to learn my Babiole over again. But it was only the pretty little closed doors I had seen outside her shut-up heart. When the heart was called to, the doors flew open, and here was the treasure exposed again to every touch, so that I had read in her mobile face indignation, affection, jealousy, sympathy, and finally contentment, before she remarked in a very demure and indifferent manner:

"On the whole I am not sorry, Mr. Maude, that it is broken off. She wasn't half good enough for you."

"Not good enough for me?" I cried in affected surprise. I was thirsting for her pretty praises. "I'm sure everybody who knew me thought me a very lucky man."

"Nobody who knew both well could have thought that," she answered very quietly "Wasn't she rude to mamma, whom you treated as if she were a queen? Is she not hard and overbearing in her manner to you, who have offered her the greatest honour you could give? And wasn't she, for all the cold charity she prides herself upon, distant and contemptuous to me when she knew I had been the object of *your* charity for seven years?"

"Not charity, child——"

"Oh, but it was. Charity that was real, full of heart and warmth and kindness, that made the world a new place and life a new thing. Why, Mr. Maude, do you know what happened that night when you met us in the cold, outside the theatre at Aberdeen, when the manager had told us he didn't want us any more, and we knew that we had hardly money enough

when we had paid for our lodging for that week to find us food for the next?"

There was colour enough in her face now, as she clasped her hands together and leant forward upon the table, with her blue eyes glistening, her sensitive lips quivering slightly, and a most sweet expression of affection and gratitude illuminating her whole face. I gave her only an inarticulate, guttural murmur for answer, and she went on with a thrill in her voice.

"You spoke first, and mamma hurried on, not knowing your voice, and of course I went with her. But though I scarcely looked at you, and certainly did not recognise you, there was something in your manner, in the sound of your voice, though I couldn't hear what you said—something kind, something chivalrous, that seemed to speak to one's heart, and made me sorry she didn't stop. And then, you know, you came after us, and spoke again; and I heard what you said that time, and I whispered to mamma who you were. And then, while you were talking to her, and I only stood and listened, I felt suddenly quite happy, for a minute before I had wondered where the help was coming from, and now I knew. And I was right you see." She bent her head, with an earnest face, to emphasise her words. "So that when poor mamma used to warn me afterwards of the wickedness of men it all meant nothing to me. For I only knew one man, and he was everything that was good and noble, giving us shelter and sympathy and beautiful delicate kindness; and to me time and thought and care that made me, out of a little ignorant girl, a thinking woman. If that was not charity, what was it?"

Now I could have told her what it was; indeed with

that little tender flower-face looking so ardently up into mine it did really need a strong effort not to tell her. In the flow of her grateful recollections she had forgotten that, the grandfatherly manner I had cultivated for so long perhaps aiding her; but I think, as I kept silence, a flash of the truth came to her, for she grew suddenly shy, and instead of going on with the list of my benefactions, as she had been evidently prepared to do, she took up the lace pocket-handkerchief which had been one of my gifts to Miss Farington, and became deeply interested in the pattern of the border. After a pause she continued in a much more self-controlled manner.

"If Miss Farington's charity had been real, she would have been interested in the people you had been kind to."

"Now you do the poor girl injustice. She took the greatest possible interest in you, for she was jealous."

"Jealous! Oh no," said Babiole with unexpected decision; and she caught her breath as she went on rapidly. "One may hate the people one is jealous of, but one does not despise them. One may speak of them bitterly and scornfully, but all the time one is almost praying to them in one's heart to have mercy —to let go what they care for so little, what one cares for one's self so much. One's coldness to a person one is really jealous of is only a thin crust through which the fire peeps and flashes out. Miss Farington was not jealous!"

It was easy enough to see that poor Babiole spoke from experience of the passion; and this conviction filled me with rage against her husband, and against myself for having brought about her marriage with such an unappreciative brute. It is always difficult

to realise another person's neglect of a treasure you have found it hard to part with; so I sat silently considering Fabian's phenomenal insensibility for some minutes until at last I asked abruptly:

"Who did he make you jealous of?"

Babiole, who had also been deep in thought, started.

"Fabian?" said she in a low voice. Then, trying to laugh, she added hastily, "Oh, I was silly, I was jealous of everybody. You see I didn't know anything, and because I thought of nobody but him, I fancied he ought to think of nobody but me—which of course was unreasonable."

"I don't think so," said I curtly. "Unless I gave a woman all my affection I shouldn't expect all hers."

"Ah, *you!*" she exclaimed with a tender smile. "There was the mistake! without knowing it I had been forming my estimate of men on what I felt to be true of you." I did not look at her; but by the way in which she hurried on after this ingenuous speech, I knew that a sudden feeling of womanly shame at her impulsive frankness had set her blushing. "But really Fabian was quite reasonable," she went on. "He only wanted me to give to him what he gave to me—or at least he thought so," she corrected.

"And what was that?"

"Well, just enough affection to make us amiable towards each other when it was impossible to avoid a *tête-à-tête*."

"But he can't have begun like that! He admired you, was fond of you. No man begins by avoiding a bride like you!"

"Ah, that was the worst of it! For six weeks

he seemed to worship me, and I—I never knew whether it was wet or fine—warm or cold. Every wind blew from the south for me, neither winter nor death could come near the earth again. We were away, you know, in Normandy and Brittany—when I try to think of heaven I always see the sea with the sun on it, and the long stretches of sand. Before we came back I knew—I felt—that a change was coming, that life would not be always like that; but I did not know, of course I could not know, what a great change it would be. Fabian said, 'Our holiday is over now, dearest, we must get to work again! My Art is crying to me.' Well, I was ready enough to yield to the claims of Art, real Art, not the poor ghost of it papa used to call up; and I was eager for my husband to take a foremost place among artists, as I knew and felt he could do. But when we got back to England—to London—to this Art which was calling to us to shorten our holiday, I found—or thought I found—that it had handsome aquiline features, and a title, and that it wore splendid gowns of materials which my husband had to choose, and that it found its own husband and its own friends wearisome, and—well, that Fabian was painting her portrait, which was to make his fortune and proclaim him a great painter."

"Who was she?" I asked in a low voice.

She named the beautiful countess whose portrait I had seen on Scott's mantelpiece on the morning when I visited him at his chambers.

"She came to our rooms several times for sittings, as she had gone to his studio before he married me. But she found it was too far to come—Bayswater being so much farther than Jermyn Street from

Kensington Palace Gardens!—and he had to finish the picture in her house. How the world swam round me, and my brain hammered in my head on those dreadful days when I knew he was with her, glancing at her with those very glances which used to set my heart on fire and make me silent with deep passionate happiness. I had seen him look at her like that when he gave her those few sittings which she found so tiresome because, I suppose, of my jealous eyes. I never said anything—I didn't, indeed, Mr. Maude, for I knew he was the man, and I was only the woman, and I must be patient; but the misery and disappointment began to eat into my soul when I found that those looks I had loved and cherished so were never to be given to me again. At first I thought it would be all right when this portrait was painted and done with; this brilliant lady's caprice of liking for my clever husband would be over, and I should have, not only the careless kindness which never failed, but the old glowing warmth that I craved like a child starving in the snow. But it never came back." A dull hopelessness was coming into her voice as she continued speaking, and her great eyes looked yearningly out over the feathery larches in the avenue to the darkening sky. "When that picture was finished there were other pictures, and there were amateur theatricals to be superintended, where the 'eye of a true artist,' was wanted, but where there was no use at all for a true artist's wife. And there were little scented notes to be answered, and their writers to be called upon; and as I had from the first accepted Fabian's assurance that an artist's marriage could be nothing more than an episode in his life, and that the less it interrupted the

former course of his life the happier that marriage would be, there was nothing for me but to submit, and to live on, as I told you, outside."

"But you were wrong, you should have spoken out to him—reproached him, moved him!" I burst out—jumping up, and playing, in great excitement, with the things on the mantelpiece, unable to keep still.

"I did," she answered sadly. "One night, when he was going to the theatre to act as usual—he had just got an engagement—he told me not to sit up, he was going to the Countess's to meet some great foreign painter—I forget his name. The mention of her name drove me suddenly into a sort of frenzy; for he had just been sweet to me, and I had fancied—just for a moment, that the old times might come back. And I forgot all my caution, all my patience. I said angrily, 'The Countess, the Countess! Am I never to hear the last of her? What do you want in this idle great lady's drawing-rooms when your own wife is wearing her heart out for you at home?" Then his face changed, and I shook and trembled with terror. For he looked at me as if I had been some hateful creeping thing that had suddenly appeared before him in the midst of his enjoyment. He drew himself away from me, and said in a voice that seemed to cut through me, 'I had no idea you were jealous.' I faltered out, 'No, no,' but he interrupted me. 'Please don't make a martyr of yourself, Babiole. Since you desire it, I shall come straight home from the theatre.'"

"He ought to have married Miss Farington!" said I heartily.

Babiole went on: "I called to him not to do so;

begged him not to mind my silly words But he went out without speaking to me again. All the evening I tortured myself with reproaches, with fears, until, almost mad, I was on the point of going to the theatre to implore him to forgive and forget my wretched paltry jealousy. But I hoped that he would not keep his word. I was wrong. Before I even thought the piece could be over he returned, having come as he said, straight home. I don't think he can know, even now, how horribly cruel he was to me that night. He meant to give me a lesson, but he did not know how thorough the lesson would be. Seeing that he had come back, although against his wish, I tried my very utmost to please, to charm him, to show him how happy his very presence could make me. He answered me, he talked to me, he told me interesting things—but all in the tone he would have used to a stranger, placing a barrier between us which all my efforts could not move. In fact he showed me clearly once for all that, however kind and courteous he might be to me, I had no more influence over him than one of the lay figures in his studio. That night I could not sleep, but next morning I was a different woman. A little water will make a fire burn more fiercely; a little more puts it out. Even Fabian, though he did not really care for me, could not think the change in me altogether for the better; but his deliberate unkindness had suddenly cleared my sight and shown me that I was beating out my soul against a rock of hard immovable selfishness. He was nicer to me after a while, for he began to find out that he had lost something when I made acquaintances who thought me first interesting and presently amusing.

But he never asked me for the devotion he had rejected, he never wanted it; he is always absorbed in half a dozen new passions; a Platonic friendship with a beauty, a furious dispute with an artist of a different school, a wild admiration for a rising talent. And so I have become, as I was bound to become, loving him as I did, just what he said an artist's wife should be—a slave; getting the worst, the least happy, the least worthy, part of his life, and all the time remaining discontented, and chafing against the chain."

"Yet you have never had cause to be seriously jealous?"

Babiole hesitated, blushed, and the tears came to her eyes.

"I don't know And—I know it sounds wicked, but I could almost say I don't care. I am to my husband like an ingenious automaton, moving almost any way its possessor pleases; but it has no soul—and I think he hardly misses that!"

"But that is nonsense, my dear child; you have just as much soul as ever."

"Oh yes, it has come to life again here among the hills. But when I go back to London——"

"Well?"

"I shall leave it up here—with you—to take care of till I come back again."

She had risen and was half laughing; but there was a tremor in her voice.

"Where are you going?" I asked as I saw her moving towards the door.

"I am going to see if there is a letter from Fabian to say when he is coming. I saw Tim come up the avenue with the papers."

"But Fabian can't know himself yet!" I objected. However that might be, she was gone, leaving me to a consideration of the brilliant ability I had shown in match-making, both for myself and my friends.

CHAPTER XXIV

WHEN I joined Mrs. Ellmer and her daughter that evening, I found that the former lady was oppressed by the conviction that "something had happened," something interesting of which there was an evil design abroad to keep her in ignorance. She had been questioning Babiole I felt sure, and getting no satisfactory replies; for while there was a suspicious halo of pale rose-colour—which in my sight did not detract from her beauty—about the younger lady's eyes, her mother made various touching references to the cruelty of want of confidence, and at last, after several tentative efforts, got on the right track by observing that my "young lady" was not very exacting, since I had not been near her that day. This remark set both her daughter and me blushing furiously, and Mrs. Ellmer, figuratively speaking, gave the "view halloo." After a very short run I was brought to earth, and confessed that—er—Miss Farington and I—er—had had a—in fact a disagreement—a mere lover's quarrel. It would soon blow over—but just at present—that is for a day or two, why——

Mrs. Ellmer interrupted my laboured explanation with a delighted and shrill little giggle.

"And so you've had a quarrel! Well, really, Mr. Maude, as an old friend, you must allow me to take

this opportunity—before you make it up again, you know—to tell you that really I think you are throwing yourself away."

The truth was that the poor little woman had been smarting, ever since Miss Farington's visit, from the supercilious scorn with which that well-informed young lady had treated her. I protested, but very mildly ; for, indeed, to hear a little gentle disapprobation of my late too matter-of-fact love gave me no acute pain.

"I wouldn't for the world have said anything before, you know, for if, of course, a person's love affairs are not his own business, whose are they? But having known you so long, I really must say, now that I can open my lips without indiscretion, that the moment I saw that stuck-up piece of affectation I said to myself: 'She must have asked him!'"

I assured Mrs. Ellmer that was not the case, but she paid little heed to my contradiction. She had relieved her feelings, that was the great thing, and it was with recovered calmness that she inquired after the friends who had made my yearly shooting party in the old times. I knew little more of them than she did; for the last gathering, when Fabian won my pretty witch's heart, had indeed been the farewell meeting predicted by Maurice Brown. That young author having shocked the public with one exceedingly nasty novel, had followed it up by another which would have shocked them still more if they had read it; this, however, they refrained from doing with a unanimity which might have proved disastrous to his reputation if a well-known evening paper had not offered him a good berth as a sort of inspector of moral nuisances, a post which the clever young Irish-

man filled with all the requisite zeal and indiscretion. As for Mr. Fussell, he had done well for himself in the city, and now leased a shooting-box of his own. While Edgar, my dear old friend and chum, had fallen back into the prosperous ranks of the happily married, and was now less troubled by political ambition than by a tendency to grow fat.

The ten days which followed the rupture of my engagement to Miss Farington passed in a great calm, troubled only by a growing sense of dread, both to Babiole and me, of what was to come after. She got well rapidly, quite well, as nervous emotional creatures do when once the moral atmosphere about them is right. For it was the loving sympathy of every living being round her, from her mother down —or up to Ta-ta, which worked the better part of her cure, though I admit that the hills and the fir-trees and the fresh sweet air had their share in it. She went out every day, sometimes with her mother and me, oftener with me and Ta-ta, as Mrs. Ellmer's strong dislike to walking exercise did not decrease as the years rolled on. As for Babiole, I thank God that the pleasure of those walks in the crisp air up the hills and through the glens was unallayed for her. The tarnish which want of warmth and sympathy had breathed on her childlike and trusting nature was wearing off; and her old faith in the companion to whom she had graciously given a place in her heart as the incarnation of kindness had only grown the stronger for the glimpses she had lately had of something deeper underneath. I even think that in the languid and irresponsible convalescence of her heart and mind from the wounds her unlucky marriage had dealt to both, she cherished a superstitious feeling

that now I had returned from my travels it would come all right, and that I should be able to mend the defects of the marriage by another exercise of the magical skill which had brought it about. So she chattered or sang or was silent at her pleasure, as we walked between the now bare hedges beside the swollen Dee, or climbed on a thick carpet of rustling brown oak leaves up Craigendarroch, and noticed how day by day the mantle of snow on Lochnager grew wider and ampler, and how the soft wail of the wind among the fir-trees in summer-time had grown into an angry and threatening roar, as if already hungering for those days and nights of loud March when the tempest would tear up the young saplings from the mountain-sides like reeds and hurl them down pell-mell over the decaying trunks which already choked up the hill-paths, and told of the storms of past years. She would look into my face from time to time to see if I was happy, for she had got the trick of reading through that ugly mask; if the look satisfied her, she either talked or was silent as she pleased, but if she fancied she detected the least sign of a cloud, she never rested until, by sweet words and winning looks, she had driven it away.

I, poor devil, was of course happy after a very different fashion. The blood has not yet cooled to any great extent at six-and-thirty, and blue eyes that have haunted you for seven years lose none of their witchery at that age, when the demon Reason throws his weight into the scale on the side of Evil, and tells you that the years are flitting by, carrying away the time for happiness, and that the beauty which steeps you to the soul in longing has been left unheeded by its possessor like a withered flower. But Babiole's

perfect confidence was her safeguard and mine, and like the wind among the pines, I kept my tumults within due bounds. I was, however, occasionally distressed by a consideration for which I had never cared a straw before—what the neighbours would say. If I, an indifferent honest man, really had some trouble in keeping unworthy thoughts and impulses down within me, what sort of conduct these carrion-hunting idiots would ascribe to a man, whom they looked upon as an importer of foreign vices and the type of all that was godless and lawless, was pretty evident. They would all, in a commonplace chorus, take the part of the commonplace Miss Farington, and unite in condemnation of poor Babiole. Now no man likes to let the reputation of his queen of the earth be pulled to pieces by a cackling crew of idiots, and, therefore, though I had not enough strength of mind to suggest giving up those treasured walks, I began, torn by my struggling feelings, to look forward feverishly to the letter which Fabian had promised to send off as soon as he knew on what date he would be free to come north. His wife herself showed no eagerness.

"He is the very worst of correspondents," she said. "He will probably write a letter to say he is coming just before starting, post it at one of the last stations he passes through, and arrive here before it."

It did not comfort me to learn thus that he might come at any moment. My conscience was pretty clear, but I wanted to have a fair notice of his arrival, that I might receive him in such a manner as to prepare the peccant husband for the desperately earnest sermon I had made up my mind to preach

him on what his wife called neglect, but what I felt sure was infidelity.

A very serious addition to the cares I felt on behalf of my old pupil came upon me in the shape of a rumour, communicated by Ferguson in a mysterious manner, that a strange figure had been seen by the keepers in the course of the past week, wandering about the hills in the daytime and hovering in the vicinity of the Hall towards evening. I spoke with one of the men who had seen him, and from what he said I could have no doubt that the wanderer was the unlucky Ellmer who, as I found by sending off a telegram to the lunatic asylum where he had been for some time confined, had been missing for four days and was supposed to be dangerous. I at once gave orders for a search to be made for him, being much alarmed by the possibility of his presenting himself suddenly to either of the two poor ladies, who were not even aware of his condition. The first day's scouring of the hills and of the forest proved fruitless, however, while Babiole was much surprised at the pertinacity with which I insisted that the wind was too keen for her to go out. On the second day I think she began to have suspicions that something was being kept from her, for on my suggesting that she had better stay indoors again as the keepers were out shooting very near the Hall, she gave me a shy apprehensive glance, but made no remonstrance. As I started to "make a round with the keeper," as I truly told her, though I did not explain with what object, she came to the door with me, making a beautiful picture under the ivy of the portico, her white throat rising out of her dark gown like a lily, and the pink colour which the mountain air

had brought back again flushing and fading in her face.

"Well," said I, looking at her with a great yearning over the fairness and brightness which were so soon to disappear from my sight, to be swallowed up in the fogs and the fever of London life, "Well, I shall call at the post-office, and see if I can't charm out of the post-mistress's fingers a letter from Fabian."

"Ah, you want to get rid of us!" said she, half smiling, half reproachful.

"No-o," said I, looking down at my gaiters, "Not so particularly."

Then we neither of us said any more, but stood without looking at each other. I don't know what she was thinking about, but I know that I began to grow blind and deaf even to the sight of her and the sound of the tapping of her little foot upon the step; the roar of the rain-swollen Muick in the valley below seemed to have come suddenly nearer, louder, to be thundering close to my ears, raising to tempest height the passionate excitement within me, and shrieking out forebodings of the desolation which would fall upon me when my poor witch should have fled away. I was thankful to be brought back to commonplace by the shrill tones of Mrs. Ellmer, who had followed her daughter to the doorstep, and who encouraged me with much banter about my shooting powers as I set off.

The gillie who accompanied me was a long, lank, weedy young Highlander, silent and shrewd, who was already a valuable servant, and who promised to develop into a fine specimen of stalwart Gaelic humanity before many years were over. We made the circuit of that part of the forest near the Hall

which had been appointed our beat for the day, but failed to find any trace of the fugitive. Jock was not surprised at this.

"A mon wi' a bee in's bonnet's nae sa daft but a' can mak' the canny ones look saft if a' will," said he with a wise look.

And his opinion, which I apprehensively shared, was that the fugitive would not be secured until he had given us some trouble.

It was a cold and gloomy day. The chilling penetrating Scotch mist shrouded the whole landscape with a mournful grey veil, and gave place, as the day wore on and the leaden clouds grew heavier, to a thin but steady snow-fall. I left Jock, as the time drew near for the arrival of the train that brought the London letters, to return to the Hall without me, and got to Ballater post-office just as the mail-bag was being carried across from the little station, which is just opposite. In a few minutes I had got my papers, and a letter for Babiole in her husband's handwriting. The snow was falling faster by this time, and already drifting before the rising wind into little heaps and ridges by the wayside and on the exposed stretch of somewhat bare and barren land which lies between Ballater and the winding Dee. I walked back at a quick pace, scanning the small snow-drifts narrowly, measuring with my eyes the progress the soft white covering was making, and wondering with the foolish heart-quiver and miracle-hunger of a school-boy on the last day of the holidays, whether that snow-fall would have the courage and strength of mind to go on bravely as it had begun, and snow us up! If only the train would stop running—it did sometimes in the depths of a severe winter—and cut off all possi-

bility of my witch being taken away from me for another month. I had worshipped her so loyally, I had been so "good," as she used to say—I couldn't resist giving myself this little pat on the back—that surely Providence might trust me with my wistful but well-conducted happiness a little longer. And all the time I knew that my solicitous questionings of sky and snow were futile and foolish, that I was carrying the death-warrant of my dangerous felicity in my pocket, and that if I had a spark of sense or manliness left in my wool-gathering old head, I ought to be heartily glad of it.

The notion of the death-warrant disturbed me, however, and when I burst into the drawing-room where Mrs. Ellmer was darning a handsome old tapestry curtain, and looking, with her worn delicate face, pink with interest, rather pretty over it, I felt nervous as I asked for Babiole. She entered behind me before the question was out of my mouth, and I put the letter into her hands without another word, and retreated to one of the windows while she opened and read it. She was moved too, and her little fingers shook as they tore the envelope. I felt so guiltily anxious to know whether she was pleased that I was afraid if I glanced in her direction she would look up suddenly and detect my meanness. So I looked out of the window and watched the snow collecting on the branches of the firs outside, while Mrs. Ellmer, without pausing in her work, wondered volubly whether Fabian wasn't ashamed of himself for having left his wife so long without a letter, and would like to know what he had got to say for himself now he had written. Then suddenly the mother gave a little piercing cry, and I, turning at once, saw that

Babiole, standing on the same spot where I had seen her last, and holding her husband's letter clenched in her hands, seemed to have changed in a moment from a young, sweet, and beautiful woman into a livid and haggard old one. She had lost all command of the muscles of her face, and while her eyes, from which the dewy blue had faded, stared out before her in a meaningless gaze, the pallid lips of her open mouth twitched convulsively, although she did not attempt to utter a word.

Her mother was by her side in a moment, while I stood looking stupidly on, articulating hoarsely and with difficulty—

"The letter! Is it the letter!"

Mrs. Ellmer snatched the paper out of her daughter's hands so violently that she tore it, and supporting Babiole with one arm, read the letter through to the end, while I kept my eyes fixed upon her in a tumult of feelings I did not dare to analyse. As she read the last word she tossed it over to me with her light eyes flashing like steel.

"Read it, read it!" she cried, as the paper fell at my feet. "See what sort of a husband you have given my poor child!"

The words and the action roused Babiole, who had scarcely moved except to shiver in her mother's arms. She drew herself away as if stung back to life, and a painful rush of blood flowed to her face and neck as she made two staggering steps forward, picked up the letter, and walked quietly, noiselessly, with her head bent and her whole frame drooping with shame, out of the room. Mrs. Ellmer would have followed, but I stopped her.

"Don't go," I said in a husky voice. "Leave her

to herself a little while first. If she wants comforting, it will come with more force later when she has got over the first shock. What was it?"

"Oh, nothing," said Mrs. Ellmer, who had become more acid on her daughter's behalf than she had ever been on her own. "Nothing but what every married woman must expect."

"Well, and what's that?"

She gave a little grating laugh.

"You a man and you ask that!"

"I'm a man, but not a married man, remember. Don't impute to me the misdemeanours I have had no chance of committing. Now what was it? Fabian wrote unkindly, I suppose."

"Oh, *dear* no. It was very much the kindest letter from him I have ever seen."

"Did he put off his coming then?"

"Not at all. He made an appointment to meet his darling in Edinburgh."

"Edinburgh!" I echoed in amazement. "Why Edinburgh?"

"Why not, Mr. Maude?" said she, in a harder voice than ever. "It's a very pretty place, and two people who are fond of each other may spend a pleasant enough time together there. Only Mr. Scott spoilt his nice little plan by a stupid mistake. Into the envelope he had addressed to his wife he slipped his letter to another woman!"

With a glance of disgust at me which was meant to include my whole sex, Mrs. Ellmer, with the best tragic manner of her old stage days, left me stupefied with rage and remorse, as she sailed out of the room.

CHAPTER XXV.

AT the time when the mind is oppressed by a long-gathering cloud of passionate yet scarcely defined anxiety, the awakening crash of an event, even of an event tragic in its consequences, is a relief. This miserable letter, therefore, exposing as it did in unmistakable terms Fabian's infidelity, shook me free of the morbid imaginings and unwholesome yearnings to which I had lately been a prey, and set me the more worthy task of devising some means of helping both my friends out of the deadlock to which I myself had unwittingly helped them to come.

For the first time I was sorry for Fabian. A serious fault committed by a person whom accidents of birth and circumstances have brought near to one's self sets one thinking of one's own "near shaves," and after that the tide of mercy flows in steadily. How was I, who had never been able to conquer my own love for an unattainable woman, to blame this man of much more combustible temperament, whom I had myself induced to form a marriage with a girl whom I had no means of knowing to be first in his heart? I would take no high moral tone with him now; I would speak to him frankly as man to man, hold myself blameworthy for my own share in the unlucky matrimonial venture, and appeal to the sense and kindness I knew he possessed not to let the punishment for my indiscretion fall upon the only one of us three who was entirely free from blame. There

crossed my mind at this point of my reflections an unpleasant remembrance of the manner in which Fabian had received a somewhat similar appeal from me years ago, and down at the bottom of my heart there lurked a conviction that he would hear whatever I might say without offence, and neglect it without scruple. However, it was impossible to be silent now; and as the grey day dissolved into darkness, and the only light in the study, to which I had retreated, came from the glowing peat-fire, I got up from the old leather chair which was consecrated to my reveries, and with one glance through the eastern window out at the great woolly flakes of snow that were now falling thickly, I left the room and went in search of Mrs. Ellmer.

I heard her voice in her daughter's room, and knocking at the door, called to her softly. She came out at once, and by her gentle manner I judged that she was already contrite for having treated me so cavalierly at our late interview.

"How is Babiole?" I asked first.

"She is quiet now and much better, Mr. Maude. Would you like to see her?"

"Well, no; I couldn't do her so much good as you can. I wanted to speak to you. I've been thinking; of course Fabian wrote two letters, and put them into the wrong envelopes. Then the letter he intended for his wife told her when he was coming, while the other letter made an appointment on the way. Can you find out by the letter which has come to your hands when he expects to arrive here?"

"It was written the night before last; the appointment was for last night," answered she with a fresh access of acidity.

"Then he probably meant to come on here to-day. I think I'll go to Ballater and meet the six o'clock train; I shall just have time. And if he doesn't come by that I'll telegraph to Edinburgh. What address does he give there?"

"Royal Hotel. But you don't suppose that he will dare to come on here when he finds out what he has done?"

"I don't suppose he will find out till he gets here."

"I hope, Mr. Maude, if he does come, you will persuade Babiole to show a little spirit. She seems inclined at present to receive him back like a lamb."

I was sorry to hear this, because it suggested to me that her feeling for her husband had declined even below the point of indifference. I left Mrs. Ellmer and went downstairs to put on my mackintosh and prepare for my tramp in the snow. The lamp in the hall had not yet been lighted, and I was fumbling in the darkness for my deer-stalker on the pegs of the hat-stand when I heard my name called in a hoarse whisper from the staircase just above me. I turned, and saw the outline of Babiole's head against the faint candle-light which fell upon the landing above through the open door of her room.

"Mr. Maude," she repeated, trying to clear and steady her voice. "Where are you going?"

"Only as far as the village," said I in a robust and matter-of-fact tone.

"Are you going to meet Fabian?"

"Yes, if he is anywhere about."

"Ah, I thought so!" burst from her lips in a sharp whisper. She came down two more steps hurriedly: "You are not to reproach him, Mr. Maude, you are not to plead for me, do you hear? What good can

you do by interceding for a love which is dead? I was jealous when I read that letter, but not so jealous as shocked, wounded. And now that I have thought a little I am not jealous at all; so what right have I to be even wounded. This lady he wrote to he has admired for a long time, and though I never knew anything before, I guessed. She is a beauty, her photograph is in all the windows, and a little fringe of scandal hangs about her. She has dash, *éclat*, brilliancy; I have heard him say so. So he is consistent, you see, after all. I can acknowledge that now, and I don't feel angry."

Her voice was indeed quite calm, although unutterably sad. But I noticed and rejoiced in the absence of that bitterness which had jarred on me so painfully in London.

"I do though," I said gruffly.

"But you must not show it. You cannot reconcile us through the heart, for you cannot make him a different man. You must be satisfied with knowing that you have made me a better wife. I am just as much stronger in heart and mind as I am in health since I have been up here; I wanted to tell you that while I had the opportunity, to tell you that you have cured me, and to—thank you."

As she uttered the last words in a low, sweet, lingering tone, a light burst suddenly upon us and showed me what the darkness had hidden—an expression on her pale face of beautiful strength and peace, as if indeed the quiet hills and the dark sweet-scented forests and the two human hearts that cared for her had poured some elixir into her soul to fortify it against indifference and neglect.

A little dazzled and befooled by her lovely appear-

ance, I stood gazing at her face without a thought as to where the idealising light came from, until I heard at the other end of the hall a grating preliminary cough, and turning, saw that it was Ferguson, entering with the lamp, who had brought about this poetical effect. He had something to say to me evidently, since instead of advancing to place the light on its usual table, he remained standing at a distance still and stiff as a statue of resignation, as his custom was when his soul was burning to deliver itself of an unsolicited communication.

"Well, Ferguson!" said I.

"Yes, sir," said he, with another cough.

But he did not come forward. Now I knew this was a sign that he considered his errand serious, and I moved a few steps towards him and beckoned him to me.

"Anything to tell me?" I asked; and as he glanced at Babiole I came nearer still.

"Jock has just been in to say, sir, that a gun has been stolen from his cottage."

Babiole, who had not moved away, overheard, and must have guessed the import of this, for I heard behind me a long-drawn breath caused by some sudden emotion.

"When did he miss it?" I asked in a very low voice.

"Just now, sir. He came straight here to tell you of it. It must have been taken while he was out on his rounds this afternoon."

I did not think the poor crack-brained creature whom I guessed to be the thief was likely to do much mischief with his prize. But I told Ferguson to put all the keepers on their guard, and to take care that

such crazy old bolts and bars as we used in that primitive part of the world should be drawn and raised, so that the unlucky fugitive should not be able to possess himself of any more weapons. I also directed that the search about the grounds should be kept up, and that if the poor wretch were caught, he was to be treated with all gentleness, and taken to the now disused cottage to await my return.

It was now so late that if Fabian had come by the four o'clock train he must by this time be half way from the station. But it was possible that he had already discovered the mistake of the letters, and had felt a shyness about continuing a journey which was likely to bring him to a cold welcome; so I stuck to my intention of going to Ballater either to meet him if he had arrived, or to telegraph to him if he had not. When I had finished speaking to Ferguson, I found that Babiole had disappeared from the hall. I was rather glad of it; for I had dreaded her questioning, and I hurried the preparations for my walk so that in a few moments I was out of the house and safe from the difficult task of calming her fears.

It was already night when I shut the hall-door behind me and stepped out on to the soft white covering which was already thick on the ground. The snow was still falling thickly, and the only sound I heard, as I groped my way under the arching trees of the avenue, was the occasional swishing noise of a load of snow that, dislodged by a fresh burden from the upper branch of a fir-tree, brushed the lower boughs as it fell to the earth. I am constitutionally untroubled by nervous tremors, and I was too deeply occupied with thoughts of Fabian and his wife to give much grave consideration to possible

danger from the unhappy lunatic who was now in all probability hidden somewhere in the neighbourhood with a weapon in his possession; but when in the oppressive darkness and stillness the tramp of footsteps in the soft snow just behind me fell suddenly on my ears, I confess that it was with my heart in my mouth, as the dairymaids say, that I turned and raised threateningly the thick stick I carried. It was, however, only Jock, gun in hand as usual, who had run fast to overtake me, and had come upon me sooner than he expected, the small lantern he carried in his hand being of little use in the darkness.

"What made you come, Jock?" I asked, not, to tell the truth, sorry to have a companion upon the lonely forest road which seemed on this night, for obvious reasons, a more gloomy promenade than usual.

"Mistress Scott bid me gang wi' ye, sir," answered he. "She said the necht was sae dark ye might miss the pairth by the burn."

We walked on together in silence until, having left the avenue far behind us, we were well in the hilly and winding road which runs through the forest from Loch Muick to the Dee. At one of the many bends in the roadway Jock suddenly stopped and stood in a listening attitude.

"Deer?" said I.

"Nae," answered he, after a pause, in a measured voice, "It's nae deer."

He said no more, but examined the barrels of his gun by the light of the lantern, and walked on at a quicker pace. I had heard nothing, but his manner put me on the alert, and it was with a sense of coming adventure that, peering before me in the darkness

and straining my ears to catch the faintest sound, I strode on beside the sturdy young Highlander. Warned as I was, it was with a sickening horror that, a moment later, I too heard sounds which had already caught his keener ears. Muffled by the falling snow, by the intervening trees, there came faintly through the air the hoarse yelping cries of a madman. I glanced at the stolid figure by my side.

"Was that what you heard, Jock?" I asked stupidly, more anxious for the sound of his voice than for his answer.

"I dinna ken, sir, if ye heard what I heard," said he cautiously.

All the while we were walking at our best pace through the snow. It seemed a long time before, at one of the sharpest turns of the road, Jock laid his hand on my shoulder and we stopped. There was nothing to be seen but trees, trees, the patch of clear snow before us and the falling flakes. But we could plainly hear the noise of tramping feet and hoarse guttural cries:

"I've done it, I've done it! I said I would, and I've kept my word! I've done it, I've done it, I've done it!"

The tramping feet seemed to beat time to the words. I had hardly distinguished these cries when I started forward again, and dashing round the angle of the road with a vague fear at my heart, I came close upon the wild weird figure of the unhappy madman who, with his hat off and his long lank hair tossed and dishevelled, was dancing uncouthly in the deep shadow of the trees and chanting to himself the words we had heard. On the ground at one side of him lay the stolen gun, and at the other, close to

the bank which bordered the road on the left, was some larger object, which in the profound darkness I could not at first define. With a sudden spring I easily seized the lunatic and held him fast, while Jock lifted the lantern high so as to see his face. As the rays of light fell upon me, however, Mr. Ellmer, who had been too utterly bewildered by the sudden attack to make sign or sound, gave forth a loud cry, and staring at me with starting eyeballs and distorted shaking lips stammered out:

"It's he, he himself! Come back! Oh my God, I am cursed, cursed!"

In the surprise and fear these words inspired me with I released my hold, so that he might with a very slight effort have shaken himself free of my grasp. But he stood quite still, as if overmastered by some power that he did not dare to dispute, and allowed himself to be transferred from my keeping to Jock's without any show of resistance. As soon as my hands were thus free, the young Highlander silently passed me the lantern, which I took in a frenzy of excitement which precluded the reception of any defined dread. I fell back a few steps until the faint rays of the light I carried showed me, blurred by the falling snow, the outline of the dark object I had already seen on the white ground. It was the body of a man. I had known that before; I knew no more now; but an overpowering sickness and dizziness came upon me as I glanced down, blotting out the sight from before my eyes, and filling me with the cowardly craving we have all of us known to escape from an existence which has brought a sensation too deadly to be borne. Every mad impulse of the passion with which I had lately been

struggling, every vague wish, every feeling of jealous resentment seemed to spring to life again in my heart, and turn to bitter gnawing remorse. I think I must have staggered as I stood, for I felt my foot touch something, and at the shock my sight came to me again and I knelt down in the snow.

"Fabian, Fabian, old fellow!" I called in a husky voice.

He was lying on his face. I put my arm under him and turned him over and wiped the snow from his lips and forehead. His eyes were wide open, but they did not see me; they had looked their last on the world and on men. The blood was still flowing from a bullet wound just under the left ribs, and his body was not yet cold.

Mad Mr. Ellmer, in the snow and the darkness, had mistaken Fabian for me. He had sworn he would kill the man who should destroy his daughter's happiness, and fate or fortune or the providence which has strange freaks of justice had blinded his poor crazy eyes and enabled him most tragically to keep his word.

CHAPTER XXVI.

I STAYED beside the body of my dead friend while Jock, by my direction, returned to the Hall, with the unhappy Ellmer, who had already fallen into a state of maudlin apathy, and was crying, not from remorse, but from the effects of cold, hunger, and exposure on his now wasted frame. He allowed himself to be led away like a child, and seemed cheered and soothed by the promise of food and fire. I wondered, as I

watched him stagger along by the side of the stalwart Highlander, that the spirit of a not ignoble revenge should have kept its vitality so long in his breast in spite of enfeebled reason, poverty and degradation.

It was a terrible vigil that I was keeping. I knew by my own feelings that the shock of this tragic return to her would be a hundred times more severe to Babiole than if her bosom had been palpitating with sweet expectancy for the clasp of a loving husband's arms. Instead of the passionate yearning sorrow of a woman truly widowed, she would feel the far crueller stings of remorse none the less bitter that her conduct towards him had been blameless.

As for me, I remembered nothing but his brilliancy, his vivacity, the twinkling humour in his piercing eyes as he would stride up and down the room, pouring out upon any inoffensive person or thing that failed in the slightest respect to meet with his approval such vials of wrath as the less excitable part of mankind would reserve for abandoned scoundrels and nameless iniquities. With all his faults, there was a charm, an exuberant warmth about Fabian that left a bare place in the heart of his friends when he was gone. As I leant over his dead body and gazed at the still white face by the light of the lantern, I wished from the depths of my heart that Ellmer had shot down the man he hated, and had left this poor lad to enjoy a few years longer the beautiful world he loved with such passionate ardour.

The snow-fall began to slacken as I waited beside him, and when Jock returned from the stable with Tim and another man, the rising moon was struggling out from behind the clouds, and giving promise of a fair night after the bitter and stormy day. We laid

my dead friend on a hurdle and carried him home to the Hall, while old Ta-ta, who had come with the men, sniffed curiously at our heels, and, divining something strange and woeful in our dark and silent burden, followed with her sleek head bent to the glistening snow, and only offered one wistful wag of her tail to assure me that if I were sad, well, I knew she was so too.

I learnt from Jock that Mrs. Ellmer had met her husband, and that, after the manner of women, she had led him in and ministered to his bodily wants while taking advantage of his weak and abject state to inflict upon him such chastisement with her voluble tongue as might well reconcile him to another long absence from her. But Jock thought that the poor wretch's wanderings were nearly over.

"I doot if a's een will see the mornin' licht again," said the gillie gravely. "A' speaks i' whispers, an' shivers an' cries like a bairn. A' must be verra bad, for a' doesna' mind the lady's talk."

"And Mrs. Scott, does she know?"

Jock looked solemn and nodded.

"Mr. Ferguson told her, and he says the poor leddy's crazed like, an' winna speak nor move."

I asked no more, and I remember no further detail of that ghastly procession. I saw nothing but Babiole's face, her eyes looking straight into mine full of involuntary reproach to me for having unwittingly brought yet another disaster upon her.

Ferguson met us at the door of the Hall, and told me, in a voice which real distress made only more harsh and guttural, that Mrs. Ellmer had had the cottage unlocked and had caused fires to be lighted there for the reception of her husband, the

poor lady believing that he would give less trouble there.

"How is Mrs. Scott?" I asked anxiously.

Ferguson answered in a grating broken whisper.

"She went away—by herself, sir—when I told her—let her guess like—the thing that had happened."

They were taking Fabian's body to the little room where he used to sleep during our yearly meetings. As the slow tramp, tramp up the stairs began, I opened the door of my study, and entered with the subdued tread we instinctively affect in the neighbourhood of those whom no sound will ever disturb again. The lamp was on the table, but had not yet been turned up. The weak rays of the moon came through the south window; for the curtains were always left undrawn until I chose myself to close out the night-landscape. The fire was red and without flame. I advanced as far as the hearth-rug and stopped with a great shock. On the ground at my feet, her head resting face downwards on the worn seat of my old leather chair, her hands pressed tightly to her ears, and her body drawn up as if in great pain, was Babiole; even as I watched her I saw that a shudder convulsed her from head to foot, and left her as still as the dead. Every curve of her slight frame, the rigidity of her arms, the evident discomfort of her cramped attitude, told me that my poor child was a prey to grief so keen that the dread of her turning her face to meet mine made a coward of me, and I took a hasty step backwards, intending to retreat. But the sight of her had unmanned me; my eyes were dim and I lost command of my steps. I touched the screen in my clumsy attempt to escape,

and To-to, disturbed from sleep, sprang up rattling his chain and chattering loudly.

Babiole, with a low startled cry that was scarcely more than a long-drawn breath, changed her attitude, and her eyes fell upon me. I stood still, not knowing for the first moment whether it would frighten her least for me to disappear unseen or let her see that it was only I. But no sooner had she caught sight of me than she turned and started up upon her knees with a look on her face so wild, so unearthly in its exaltation that my heart seemed to stand still, and my very blood to freeze with the fear that the mind of the little lady had been unable to stand the shock of her husband's death.

"Babiole, Babiole," I said hoarsely; and moved out of myself by my terrible fear, I came back to her and stooped, and would have raised her in my arms with the tenderness one feels for a helpless child alone in the world, to try to sooth and comfort her. But before my hands could touch her a great change had passed over her, a change so great, so marked, that there was no mistaking its meaning; and breaking into a flood of passionate tears, while her face melted from its stony rigidity to infinite love and tenderness, she clasped her hands and whispered brokenly, feverishly, but with the ardour of an almost delirious joy:

"Thank God! Thank God! Then it was not you! They told me it was you!"

I stepped back, startled, speechless, overwhelmed by a rush of feelings that in my highly-wrought mood threw me into a kind of frenzy. Drunk with the transformation of my despair into full-fledged hope, and no longer master of myself, I stretched out

a madman's arms to her, I heard my own voice uttering words wild, incoherent, without sense or meaning, that seemed to be forced out of my breast in spite of myself, under pressure of the frantic passion that had burst its bond at the first unregarded moment, and spoilt at one blow all my hard-won record of self-control and self-restraint. She had sprung to her feet and evaded my touch; but as she stood at a little distance from me, her face still shone with the same radiance, and she looked, to my excited fancy, the very spirit of tender, impassioned, exalted human love, too sweet not to allure, too pure not to command respect. There was no fear in her expression, only a shade of grave gentle reproach. As she fixed her solemn eyes upon me I stammered and grew ashamed, and my arms dropped to my sides as the recollection of the tragedy which had brought us here came like a pall over my excited spirits. Then she came round the table on her way towards the door, and would have gone out without a word, I think, if the abject shame and self-disgust with which I hung my head and slunk out of her way had not moved her to pity I was afraid she would not like to pass me, savage beast as I had shown myself to be, so I had turned my back to the door and moved towards my old chair. But Babiole was too noble-hearted to need any affectations of prudery, and to see her old friend humiliated was too painful for her to bear.

"Mr. Maude," she called to me in a low voice, and the very sound of her voice brought healing to my wounded self-esteem.

I turned slowly, without lifting my eyes, and she held out her little hand for me to take.

"I am a great rough brute," I said hoarsely. "It is very good of you to forgive me."

"You are our best friend, now and always," she said, holding her hand steadily in mine. She continued with an effort: "You are not hurt; then it is——"

She looked at me with eyes full of awe, but she was prepared for my answer.

"Fabian," I whispered huskily.

"He is dead?" I scarcely heard the words as her white lips formed them.

"Yes."

"God forgive me!" she said brokenly, while her eyes grew dark and soft with sorrow and shame; then drawing her hand from mine, she crept with noiseless feet out of the room.

I remained in the study for some time, a prey to the most violent excitement, in which the emotions of grief and remorse struggled vainly against the intoxicating belief that Babiole loved me. I strode up and down what little space there was in the room, until the four walls could contain me no longer. Then for an hour I wandered about the forest, climbed up to the top of a rock which overlooked the Dee and the Braemar road, and came back in the moonlight by the shell of old Knock Castle, from which, three hundred years ago, James Gordon went forth to fight for his kinsman and neighbour, the Baron of Braickley, and fell by his side in one of the fierce and purposeless skirmishes which seem to have been the only occupation worth mentioning of the Highland gentlemen of those times. When I returned home I saw Babiole's shadow through the blind of the little room where her husband's body was lying.

It was long past my dinner hour, and I was so brutishly hungry that I felt thankful that neither of the unhappy ladies was present to be disgusted with my mountain appetite. I had scarcely risen from table when Ferguson informed me that Mrs. Ellmer had sent Tim to beg me to come to the cottage to see her husband, who she feared was dying. Remembering the poor wretch's ghastly and haggard appearance when we found him, I was not surprised; nor could I, knowing the fate that might be in store for him if he lived, be sorry that his miserable life would in all probability end peacefully now.

I found him lying in bed in one of the upper rooms of the cottage with his wife standing by his side. His eyes were feverishly bright, and the hand he let me take felt dry and withered. He said nothing when I asked him how he was, but stared at me intently while his wife spoke.

"He wanted to see you, Mr. Maude, just while he felt a little better and able to speak," said she, "to tell you how sorry he is for the foolish and dreadful thoughts he had about you, when he did not know the true state of the case, and when his head was rather dizzy because he had lived somewhat carelessly, you know."

Poor little woman! it was to her all my sympathy went, to this brave, energetic, fragile creature whose worst faults were on the surface, and who, to this bitter shameful end, valiantly worked with her busy skilful hands, and made the best of everything. She looked so worn that all the good her late easy life had done her seemed to have disappeared; and from shame at her husband's conduct, though her voice remained bright and shrill, she did not dare to

meet my eyes. I went round to her, and held one of her thin work-worn hands as I spoke to her husband.

"And you've persuaded him that I'm not an ogre after all," I said cheerfully.

Mr. Ellmer, after one or two vain attempts to answer, got back voice enough to whisper huskily, with a dogged expression of face—

"She says I was wrong—that if Babiole was unhappy, it was the fault of—the other one. Well, if I was wrong then, I'm right now. You'll marry her?"

"Yes."

He gave a nod of satisfaction, and looked contemptuously at his wife.

"And she says I was mad! Perhaps so. But I was mad to some purpose if I shot the right man."

With a hoarse weak laugh he turned away, and as she could not induce him to speak to me again, I bade him good-night and held out my hand, which, after a minute's consideration, he took and even pressed limply for a moment in his hot fingers. I had scarcely got to the door when his wife began to scold him for his ingratitude, and he startled us both by suddenly finding voice enough to call me back. He had struggled up on to his elbow, and a rush of excitement had given him back his strength for a few moments.

"She shall hold her tongue!" he growled angrily, by way of prelude, as I returned to the bedside. "By your own showing you have loved Babiole seven years?"

"Yes."

"And during these long walks I have watched you take with her lately on Craigendarroch and through the forest, you have never told her so?"

"Never. One can't be a man seven years to be a scoundrel the eighth, Mr. Ellmer."

"Then which of us two ought to be the most grateful now, I for your lending me a roof to die under, or you for my bringing back to you the woman you were a fool to let go before."

It was an impossible question for me to answer, and I was thankful that the dying man's ears caught the sound of footsteps on the stairs, which diverted his attention from me and gave me an opportunity to escape. Outside the door I met Babiole, who flitted past me quickly as I went down. I saw no more of the ladies that night, for both stayed at the cottage. But next day when Fergusson came to my room, he informed me that the poor fugitive had died early that morning.

I was sincerely thankful that the unfortunate man had slipped so easily out of the chain of troubles he had forged for himself, since, as I expected, intelligence of the affair had already got abroad, and two police officers from Aberdeen came down early in the afternoon, and were followed soon after by an official of the asylum from which Ellmer had made his escape.

Then there were inquiries to be held, and a great deal of elaborate fuss and formality to be gone through before the bodies of my poor friend and his crazy assailant could be laid quietly to rest. I sent the two widowed ladies away to Scarborough to recover from the effects of the torturing interrogatories of high-dried Scotch functionaries and gave myself up to a week of the most dismal wretchedness I ever remember to have endured, until the half-dozen judicial individuals who questioned me at various

times and in various ways concerning details, of most of which I was entirely ignorant, succeeded in reducing me to a state of abject imbecility in which I answered whatever they pleased, and went very near to implicating myself in the double catastrophe which was the subject of the inquiry. A tragic occurrence must always have for the commonplace mind an element of mystery; if that element is not afforded by the circumstances of the case, it must be introduced by conjecture and ingenious cross-questioning of witnesses. Therefore, when at last the "inquiry" was ended, and victim and assailant were both buried in Glenmuick churchyard amid the stolid interest of a little crowd of Highland women and children, I found that I had become the object of a morbid curiosity and horror as the central figure of what had already become a very ugly story.

I suppose that Fabian's death, the terrible circumstances which surrounded it, and the barrier they formed between myself and Babiole, combined to make me more sensitive than of old. It is certain that popular opinion, about which I had never before cared one straw, now began to affect me strangely; that my solitude became loneliness, and although the old wander-fever burned in me no longer, I began to feel that the mountains oppressed me, and the prospect of being snowed up with my books and my beasts, as I had been many times before, lowered in my horizon like a fear of imprisonment. I had heard nothing from Babiole except through her mother, whose letters were filled with minute accounts of the paralysing effect her husband's death seemed to have had upon the younger lady. These tiding struck me with dismay! I began to feel that I had under-

estimated the effect that such a shock would have on a keenly sensitive nature, and to fear that his tragic death had perhaps done more to reinstate Fabian in the place he had first held in her heart than years of penitent devotion could have done. This conjecture became almost conviction when, just as I had found a pretext on which to visit the ladies, I received a letter from Babiole herself which struck all my hopes and plans to the ground. It was written in such a constrained manner that the carefully-chosen expressions of gratitude and affection sounded cold and formal; while the purport of the letter stood out as precise and clear as a sentence of death to me. She was going away. She found it impossible to impose longer upon my generosity, and she had obtained the situation of companion to a lady who was going to Algeria, and before the letter announcing the fact was in my hands, she would be on her way to France.

I confess I could have taken more calmly the burial of Larkhall and all it contained under an avalanche. That she could go like that, with no farewell but those few chilling words, on a journey, to an engagement to which she had bound herself, so she said, for three years, was a shock so great that it stunned me. To-to and Ta-ta both knew that night there was something wrong, and we sat, three speechless beasts, dolefully round the fire, without a rag of comfort between the lot of us. There was no use in writing; she was gone; besides, I wasn't quite a serf, and if she had no more feeling than that for me now that she was free, well at least she should not know that I was less philosophical. So I doggedly resolved to give up all thoughts of roaming, lest my ill-disciplined feet should carry me where I was not wanted; and, presenting a

respectful but firm refusal to give up my lease of Larkhall to a certain great personage who had taken a fancy to it, I wrote a stupid letter to Mrs. Ellmer highly applauding her daughter's action, and settled myself down again to the bachelor life nature seems to have determined me for.

But the winds blow more coldly than they used to do across the bleak moors, the mists are more chilling than they used to be, and the broad lines of snow on Lochnagar, that I once thought such a pretty sight in the winter sun, look to me now like the pale fingers of a dead hand stretching down the mountain side, the taper points lengthening towards me day by day, even as the keen and nipping touch of a premature old age seems to threaten me as the new year creeps on and the zest of life still seems dead, and like a foolish woman who neglects the pleasures within her reach to dream idly of those she cannot have, I sneak through the deserted rooms of the old cottage when the sinking of the sun has allowed me to be maudlin without loss of self-respect, and I won't answer for it that I don't see ghosts in the silent rooms. And after all, what right has a man of nearly forty, and not even a decent-looking one at that, to ask for better company? Poor little witch! Let her wake up to love and happiness with whom she will, after the feverish dream of disappointed hope which I unwittingly encouraged, I'll not blame her, and it will go hard with me, but I'll bring a cheerful face to her second wedding. For a first love which has not burnt itself out, but has been extinguished at its height, leaves an inflammable substance very ready to ignite again on the earliest reasonable provocation. And as for me, I have To-to, Ta-ta, my books and my

pine-woods, and may be the spring will bring me a better philosophy.

* * * * * *

April.

P.S.—Spring has done it! Surely never was such a spring since the hawthorn buds first burst on the hedges, and the pale green tips of the hart's-tongue first peeped out of the fissures in the gray rocks by the Gairn. It all came at once too—sweet air and sunshine, and fresh bright green in the dark fringe of the larches. Yesterday I swear we were in the depths of as black and hard a winter as ever killed the sheep in their pens, and splitting the earth with frost, caused great slabs of rock to fall from their place on Craigendarroch into the pass below; but this morning came Babiole's letter, and when I went out of the house with that little sheet of paper against my breast, I found that it was spring. She is back in England; she "would be glad to see me"; she "hopes I shall soon find some business to take me to London." I rather think I shall; my portmanteau is packed indeed, my sandwiches are cut, the horse being harnessed. And I haven't a fear for the end now; the embers are warm in her heart for me, *me* to set glowing. The great personage may have the lease of Larkhall at her pleasure; To-to and Ta-ta, and the rest of my small household must follow me to a warmer home in the South. For my exile is over, and I am reconciled to my kind.

Babiole wants me; God bless her!

THE END.

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